

# JAYLIT

ISSUE 05  
JAN 2022



THE JOURNAL OF AFRICAN YOUTH LITERATURE



SHORT STORIES  
VISUAL ART  
ESSAYS  
POETRY  
PLAYS

VIRTUAL  
2021  
CONTEST

FEATURING  
WINNING  
PIECES

RES &  
RES  
STUDENT  
FESTIVAL



# JAY LIT

ISSUE 05  
JAN 2022



THE JOURNAL OF AFRICAN YOUTH LITERATURE

*The Journal of African Youth Literature* (JAY LIT) is a grassroots initiative providing African youths with a platform to publish their writing. We also publish writing by other individuals that falls under the general theme of African youth. We publish content from across Africa in any languages used on the continent.

**Submissions for the sixth issue open on 1 March 2022.**

Please consult the [author guidelines](#) on the website carefully before submitting.

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# EDITORIAL FOREWORD

I would like to thank **Andi Colombo** for helping forge the *JAY Lit* collaboration with **Res4Res Student Festival 2021** held by the University of Cape Town. We're thrilled to present the winning pieces and some runners up from the festival in this issue. These include **Buyile Kokose's** poem 'UFUKA' in isiXhosa and **Nomajuba Hlatshwayo's** 'In The Mirror'. We also feature the winning visual arts piece: 'Isolation\_the feminine body' by **Mandisa Shandu** and finalist **Neema Masinde's** prose poetry about a woman's suffering after abduction.

Our cover star is 18-year-old DJ **Thenjiwe Nxumalo-Parsley** from Cape Town. Find out more about her and read her short story 'Bone Child' from page 79. We have five more short stories, including the LGB-themed 'A Search for the Closet's Key' by **Anne Tinargwo** and **Senzelokuhle Nkabini's** 'Alex and the Blesser'. 'Our Ride or Die' from issue 2 has been revised and republished by **Sandile Ngubane** for this issue.

It is always a tough call to make but my choice for the best short story for issue five is by **Sithethile Sgwentu**. 'Lulu on the Shore' is an incredibly insightful piece about the complexity of bullying and friendship. It also adeptly tackles critical race and economic issues in South Africa. Sgwentu is a young author to watch.

I am very proud and excited to include a play that I helped develop, *Vashti* by **Enoima Edem Okon**. This feminist revisionist tragedy about some of the events in the book of Esther disrupts religious fundamentalism and patriarchal dogma. With this masterpiece, I assert that *JAY Lit* ceases to be ephemeral literature, if indeed it ever was.

For this our fifth issue, I would like to welcome poet **Mphae Charmaine Mashifane** with an exceptional poem, 'I am leaving where I come from', **Cara Helene** with 'Meisie's Minutiae', and 'Tears of a Fountain' by **Aisha Ibrahim**. These are three touching poems for youth readers today by women authors, each one brilliant in her own right. Cara Helene also created the stunning art piece for *Vashti*.

**Linda Wa Ka Shabangu's** poetry offers the isiZulu 'Izinyembezi' ['Tears'] with a translation plus five English pieces. We are very proud to present our first Afrikaans poetry by **Benito Trollip**. **Royston Pieterse's** essay 'A Melee with Morality' discusses the concepts of good and evil in the fantasy genre in Nigerian author **Nnedi Okorafor's** *What Sunny Saw in the Flames* in relation to the Islamic fantasy epic *The Throne of the Crescent Moon* by **Ahmed Saladin**.

With this issue, we bring the total number of authors and creatives featured in the journal to over 110 from across 15 countries in Africa. We have also featured 17 different languages and dialects thus far. We will continue to work hard to expand on this excellent progress with more languages and countries on the African continent in future issues.

## Bronwyn Bowles-King

*JAY Lit* Managing Editor

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## JOIN OUR AMBASSADOR PROGRAMME

Would you be interested in helping us promote *JAY Lit* to other authors from your home country? If you want to see your country and home language represented in the Journal, being an Ambassador is a great way to make it happen! We want to address the following through this initiative:

- We receive few **submissions from nations outside South Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa**. We are determined to change that and are seeking ways to reach other African writers. You can start simply by telling your friends on social media about the Journal.
- We want more **submissions that aren't in English**, though we welcome those too. Perhaps you can help us reach those who are writing or could write in languages such as Swahili, Chichewa, Zulu, etc. All African languages are welcome, as well as those spoken widely in certain regions such as French and Portuguese.
- We are also interested in the way youths mix and use various languages together in practice (**multilingualism**) and capturing that for **cultural preservation**.
- Another major challenge we face is **reaching rural areas**. Can you reach out to those in outlying areas in your country or region? Sharing info about *JAY Lit* with high schools, teachers, libraries, community forums, etc. in rural areas can ensure we are more inclusive and give opportunities to those in disadvantaged areas.



# CONTENTS

## Poetry

<i>Buyile Kokose</i> UFUKA	5
<i>Mphae Charmaine Mashifane</i> I am leaving where I come from	7
<i>Linda Wa Ka Shabangu</i> Izinyembezi Tears A Spark Blacks Don't Cry A Picture of a Woman A Stone We Kissed	9
<i>Nomajuba Hlatshwayo</i> In The Mirror Evil Prevails I Dare You	17
<i>Benito Trollip</i> by 'n blou stoel, blou Amper Lepoop	21
<i>Aisha Ibrahim</i> Tears of a Fountain	23
<i>Cara Helene</i> Meisie's Minutiae The Dance	26
<i>Neema Masinde</i> I Didn't Leave	29



Short Stories

<i>Anne Tinargwo</i> A Search for the Closet’s Key	33
<i>Sithethile Sgwentu</i> Lulu on the Shore	46
<i>Senzelokuhle Nkabini</i> Alex and the Blessor	75
<i>Thenjiwe Nxumalo-Parsley</i> Bone Child	79
<i>Sandile Ngubane</i> Our Ride or Die	82

Visual Art

<i>Mandisa Shandu</i> Isolation_the feminine body	91
--	----

Plays

<i>Enoima Edem Okon and Berren Thamper</i> Vashti	94
--	----

Essays

<i>Royston Pieterse</i> A Melee with Morality: A discussion of how the main characters in <i>The Throne of the Crescent Moon</i> and <i>What Sunny Saw in the Flames</i> navigate the tension between good and evil	126
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THE JOURNAL OF AFRICAN YOUTH LITERATURE

# POETRY





## Buyile Kokose

Buyile Kokose is a writer and musician living in Cape Town, South Africa. He was born in Butterworth in the Eastern Cape and has been writing since he was in high school. He has penned the drama *Seeds of the Same Tree* and composes poetry for pleasure. Buyile currently studies music performance at the University of Cape Town (UCT) and works as a scriptwriter and assistant director for local series.

Buyile won the award for Fan Favourite Writing at the UCT 2021 Res4Res Student Festival. Buyile's winning poem 'UKUFA' [DEATH] is presented here. The isiXhosa poem is highly unique, intimate, and based on the poet's observations of the anguish that young children experience after losing their parents at an early age.

Find Buyile on [Facebook](#) and [LinkedIn](#).



## UKUFA

Yanga ndinga thabatha usiba ndibhale kumacwecwe eengqondo  
Umnqweno kungena kwezenu iintliziyo ngeenzame zokufaka uxolo nokomelela  
Ukuzama ukupholisa amanxeb'anzulu abangel'iintliziyo zidandatheke ziintlungu  
Umphefumlo ubephantsi ngoku lahlekelwa ngamathemba, nenkolo ibeluzizi ukuthamba

Mohluthi ndini wabazali, menzi weenkedama oshiya kusisanxwe nezijwili zihlokoma  
Sithi sisancanca kuloo mibele ibhongxileyo suke usishiye nemifanekiso ilenga-lenga  
Kufa! uyingxuba kaxaka esele ixake namaxhego, kuba ulutshaba ulochitha imizi yakuthi  
Chopha nathi phantsi ntondini! Sikhanyisele ukuba yintoni lena usizondela yona kangaka

Oh, ndibu hlungu ngaphakathi kuba ixhala endinalo ngaba bangeka qini ngeminyaka  
Kuba kaloku lofika lona ixesha, bandibuze ukuba uph'umama! Uph'utata bhuti!  
Ndaku phendula ndithini xa sele abantwana bezama ukuqonda ngabazali babo!  
Ndaku thetha lwimi luni kubo ukuzama ukuyibhentsisa batsho nabo bacacelwe!

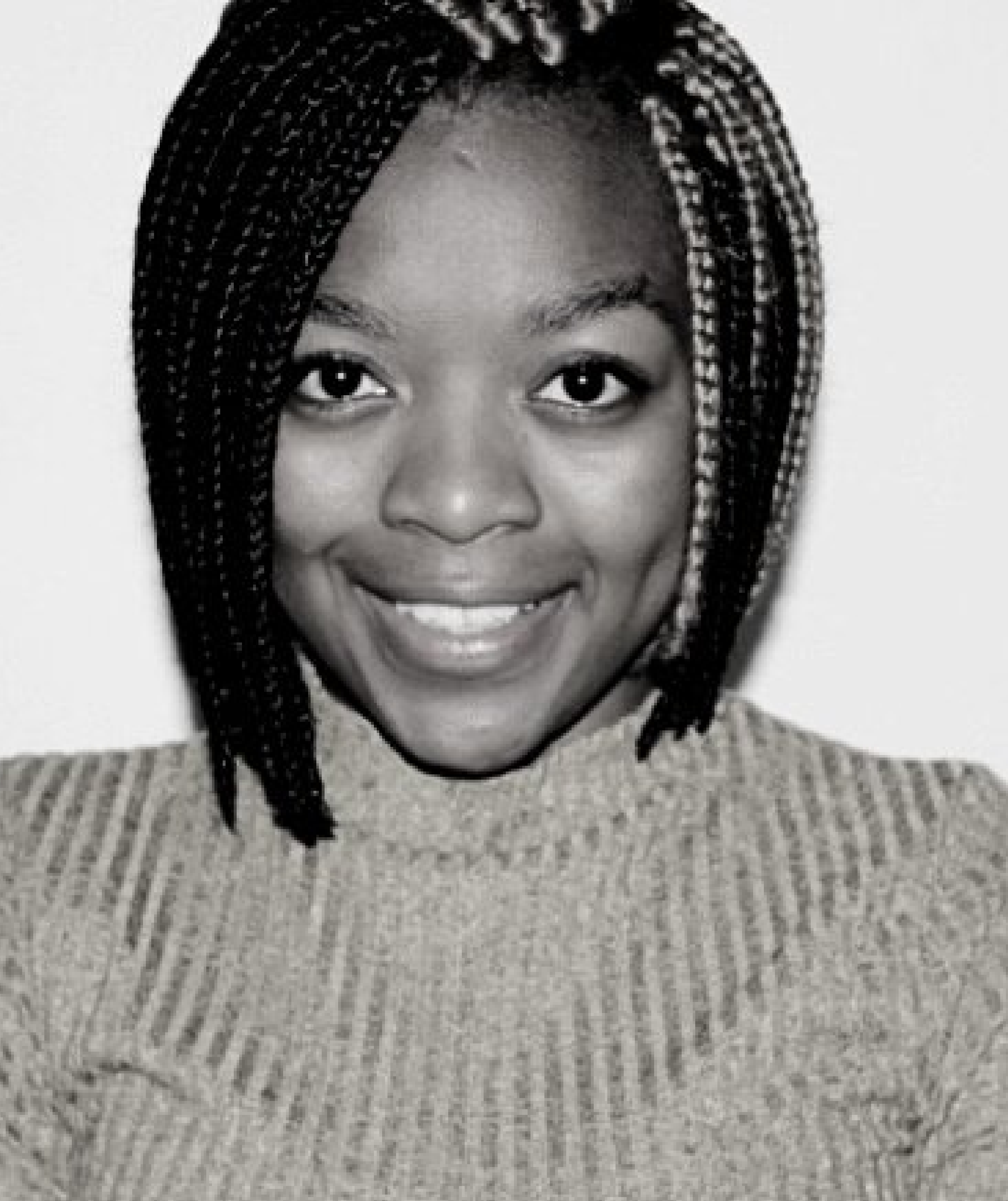
Ndizibona njenge nkomo eyodwa kwisibaya sika tata kuba usigqibile ekhaya  
Intonga yomsimelelo yophukile, yazuba, ndiyo jingxela ndixhaswe ngubanina!  
Kaloku nam andika qini ngokweminyaka bendisa jonga ukomelezwa ngabadala  
Kaloku nam bendiselilo ithol'ebelisa jonga uncanca kwithokazi, umama ngokutsho

Bendingazi lakufika lona elixesha ndizibone ndize ndingasena banina wokukhalela  
Kubuhlungu kum ngaphakathi kodwa, zizinyanzelo ndomelele ndiqine ndixele intsika  
Lifikile lona ixesha ndingene kumaxhanti oomkhulu ndibabize ooPhalo, ooRharhabe  
Kuba yona lena into! ifanele bona ngoba ngabo isiqalo kwaye, nesiphelo ikwangabo

Ndiya guqa ngedolo lomphefumlo kuni mzontsundu ndisiva umthwalo unzima  
Ndisondelela kuni ngawo lomzuzu njengo nyana wena, ndicela nindibonise indlela

Andinisoli nganto zinyanya zakuthi kuba ndinethemba ninolwazi nezizatha ngovuma  
Ngalamazwi ndicela amandla okomelela zendikwazi ukumelana nalemeko. Ndabulela





# Mphae Charmaine Mashifane

Mphae Charmaine Mashifane is a coffee-loving South African writer who expresses her being in poetry. Her passion in literature lies in inspiring change. Her works have been published by *Botsotso*, *Kalahari Review*, *Brittle Paper*, *Poetry Potion*, *Visual Verse*, *Versification*, *Aberration Labyrinth*, and more.

Find Mphae on [Instagram](#).



# Mphae Charmaine Mashifane

## I am leaving where I come from

Where I come from the symbol of love is a man hanging on a cross  
Stripped naked and battered to the bone  
They narrate the story as if he picked the weapons himself  
As if he filled the soldier's arms with strength  
As if he never tried to opt out the night before  
They say; "that is love, one for all"

Where I come from self love is synonymous with selfish  
"How dare you eat when we are hungry?"  
Where I come from we are trained to please others  
To entertain strangers and leave them at ease  
The hefty prize we pay for this is never weighed

Where I come from selflessness is to be empty of the self  
Like the sun robs itself of light to give us some  
Like the stars endure nyctophobia for our sake  
Like our intestines are claustrophobic but stick around anyway

Where I come from love hurts  
Love leaves you empty  
I am leaving where I come from

It will take more than a quote  
To undo this generational tie  
To live without trying to die



# Linda Wa Ka Shabangu

Linda Wa Ka Shabangu is a Johannesburg-based theatre practitioner and he also writes poetry. An alumnus of the Market Theatre Laboratory, he is a thespian, playwright, and stage director.

Linda told *JAY Lit* recently, “I have a sweet and bitter, ugly and beautiful relationship with a desire to write constantly. It’s the hardest thing to do, yet, at the same time, it becomes the most therapeutic thing to do for healing yourself and others. It’s like being fully naked in a crowd of people ready to be judged and sometimes it’s like talking to someone who understands you even when you not saying a word. Writing gives a voice to speak to, to speak from, to cry from, to cry with, to smile for, and to nurture the wounded pieces of yourself in this world while indirectly healing others with your pen.”

We present a collection of Linda Wa Ka Shabangu’s poetry, beginning with a poem in IsiZulu entitled *Izinyembezi* [Tears] with an English translation.

Follow Linda on [Instagram](#) and on [Twitter](#).



# Linda Wa Ka Shabangu

## Izinyembezi

ISiyaphila ngokomzimba kodwa ngomoya asiphili

Sesavele safana nazo izidumbu, umehluko yiko ukuthi thina siyakwazi ukukhuluma, siyabona, siyacabanga, yebo siyabhala, kodwa iqiniso ukuthi umhlabathi uyasisinda

Ingani noma sikhala asizwakali nokho kwathiwa ingane engakhali ifela embelekweni.

Izinyembezi zethu sezaphenduka Injabulo kwabanye,  
Nodokotela ngenkathi umama engikhipha kwesakhe  
isibeletho abashongongani ukuthi ngizalelwa ukukhala?

Yebo ngiyavuma ayikho ingane engakhali mayizalwa nanoma  
ke izinyembezi zam zingasho lutho kwabanye,  
ingabe zinyembezi zami uyongilamulela nini?

Yebo ngiyavuma emhlabeni uzalwa wedwa, uhamba wedwa kodwa bayaphi  
Ubuntu nozwelo?

Iqiniso ukuthi siyaphila kepha asiphili, sikhala esikanandi kodwa sobuye sithule, sikhulume.  
Sikhala sicabanga, sikhala sibhekile...  
Kanti wena zinyembezi u phela nini na?

Ngabe Impilo yizinyembezi nentukuthelo na?  
Injabulo yona sobuye siyithole ngakuphi??  
Zinyembezi zami ingabe uyongilamulela nini na??



## Tears

*English translation of Izinyembezi.*

We live physically but spiritually we do not

We are already like the corpses, the difference is that we can speak,  
we see, we think, yes we write, but the fact is that the soil weighs us down

Why the cry was not heard, but it was said that a baby who did not cry died in the womb.

Our tears have turned to joy for others,  
And the doctor, while my mother took me out of her  
Why did they not cry out that I was born to cry?

Yes I agree no crying baby should be born either  
but my tears will not mean anything to others,  
when will you save my tears?

Yes, I agree in the world you are born alone, you travel alone but where do they go  
Personality and compassion?

The fact that we are alive but not alive, we cry sweetly, but then we are silent again, talking.  
We are thinking, we are watching...  
And when will you end up in tears?

Is Life Tears and Anger?  
Where else can we find happiness?  
My tears, when will you help me??



# Linda Wa Ka Shabangu

## A Spark

In the mist of darkness  
I found a spark smiling at me

And it was then, I spoke about galaxies and stars that came at night,  
to steal our hearts, our time in the universe.

Once our eyes kissed  
There was no turning back, our kiss gave birth to eternity,  
opening a world of everlasting joy, no one would dare dream of escaping

Tranquillity reigned and all that life constantly throws in storms ceased,  
bowed to a covenant of our lips.

As though we were a kiss incarnate  
As though it was meant only for us, it was perfect, we were perfect  
We had our flaws  
We had our fears  
We had our insecurities  
We had our misconceptions but our hearts were in love,  
and fell deeper in love every time  
we looked at each other



## Blacks Don't Cry

God!God!God!

Are you even there?

Every day my life is devoted to you I have conquered all the temptations,  
lost people I loved at your silence and absence  
yet you remain immune to my dreams.

I do good in this dirty world I see  
yet speak nothing about it cause you are there to heal us from all  
I see our homes fall apart  
I see our leaders' greed at our expense  
I see our skin colour being the tragedy of life  
I see how we are not equal  
I see how white dogs still eat and live better than us  
I see how the poor remain poor from the system that buried our forefathers  
I see how the rich keep getting rich

But I pray all will be equal one day,  
sometimes I wonder if there's any truth in your words, come back and  
see how people slave their lives to you, their jobs, to the poverty that has become a norm to  
live.  
What is this life we living?

I have cried all the tears in my soul, broke the spirit where faith was sane.  
All my life, I have been loyal to you  
but never have you freed me from this hell of a life  
I give all my hard-earned money to your messengers,  
money that I could have saved to buy my mother a better house, better shoes for myself  
instead I give it to my pastor who lives a better life, in a big mansion, drives fancy cars  
I am tired I am tired I have nothing. All is given to you

I pray for a better life, not a better job  
All jobs are the same, long hours, less money and more debts, I just need a better life God



# Linda Wa Ka Shabangu

## A Picture of a Woman

Yesterday I looked at a mirror.  
I wanted to see a woman.  
A black woman.  
I closed my eyes for a bit, took a breath and opened my eyes.

There she was  
Hanging on top of a tree naked with blood dripping like a broken tap of water  
the ground swallowing her life away  
with wind blowing  
the bush comforted the body of the deceased

Yesterday I looked at a mirror.  
I wanted to see a woman.  
A black woman.  
I closed my eyes for a bit longer, took a breath and opened my eyes again.

‘Look at her!  
What a slut  
Make-up on point, crop-top on point, weave on point, mini-skirt on point  
She walks with lust in-between her thighs on this street  
breaking man’s necks, erecting desires and temptations in men’s eyes’  
They said she deserved it

Yesterday I looked at a mirror.  
I wanted to see a woman.  
A black woman.  
I closed my eyes for a bit longer and  
took a breath and at last,  
I opened my eyes.

At night  
I heard a scream  
But it seemed far.  
Drunkards going back home to sober up, our intoxicated youth.  
The scream continued, the scream continued, this drunkard disturbing sleep  
a pillow over my head, sleep is wondering in my mind and the screams slowly fading to  
silence.

It’s morning,  
my weary eyes see a newspaper  
‘Missing girls’ on the front page  
I did hear screams last night.





## A Stone

They are coming

I hear them

It's the people.

The cries, the undying wounds, the bloodshed

All of them are coming for your conscience comrade

Your bed knows no peace like empty promises  
of a colourful rainbow and a new dawn  
sold on a silver platter

Body tossing and turning in the dark  
falling over the throne  
crawling on the floor for mercy  
screaming in agony "Amandla"  
because freedom is not yet Uhuru.

Truth, seeking justice, for your own brothers and sisters  
whose slogans have shattered the dream of tomorrow

Peace knows no home in your sleep, home is a lie

I hear them, broken-hearted, heavy-spirited with burden

They are coming for you.

I am what you don't take to mind  
I am an ear beyond the masses  
an ear that hears no lies go unturned

I have fought alongside them, down the ground  
they would pick me up and throw me into  
war with anger on their faces and fists up

I have seen people die  
like flies every time I left someone's hand.

I have seen them erase history written on me in caves  
I have been thrown in the deepest ocean with messages  
to our ancestors, who even today, their bones still lay still and  
unfound in the wrath of waters, I am a memory they could never bury  
a stone holding onto our ancestor's soul.



# Linda Wa Ka Shabangu

## We Kissed

(A middle-aged man looking at a mirror)

Black tea with a teabag gasping for air, a pack of cigarettes, and an empty ashtray,  
That's all I need,  
what's missing now is the silence in mind.  
I know my thoughts are calmed by smoke,  
a bunch of blank pages and a pen.

My bed has become an ocean of tears,  
a tear from this heart of mine, the one and the only,  
my reasons of day and night, faith to fall or rise.

Faithful deeds  
what god?  
why is love a sin?  
why are sinners haters?  
What sin in my lust love?

How does love cage itself to thighs gently touching with palms of truth,  
naked our bodies meet.  
Do you think the king of this temple won't find the missing forbidden fruits?

Counting stars in her eyes as my sweat steals her heart,  
a heart that should by law belong to another,  
she is his queen and I am just a thief for passion.  
She is no queen to me and a kingdom tonight sleeps without a queen,  
she is in my arms.

The king is lonely without a queen, he is what she knows and vowed  
into being with for eternity.  
I am just a thief that stole a heart,  
betrayed logic of knowing what's right and what's wrong,  
we did it until birds sang myths of the morning, the truth was, she was in my bed.

What's right not to be wrong?  
What's wrong not to be right?  
Brother, my temptations echo in my heart, unfaithful I was to my own queen with the  
heartbeat of the queen that was yours

Yes! We kissed naked, we did,  
My bed has become an ocean of tears, a tear from this heart of mine,  
now I am pulling myself towards myself,  
waiting to be present in my presence.

Nothing could have ever warned me about the voices in my head,  
It's morning now, my tea is cold, ashtray filled with ash,  
I have lost time putting my thoughts down like a puzzle,  
The world is blurry every time the sun awakes.  
I am half awake and half asleep, this person I see now isn't meant to be me

(stands and looks at the bed)





## Nomajuba Hlatshwayo

Nomajuba Hlatshwayo took the prize for Best Written Piece with the poem *In The Mirror* at the Res4Res Student Festival and arts competition held by the University of Cape Town (UCT) in 2021. We present the winning poem plus two more of her excellent poems.

Nomajuba is an ambivert, an artist, and a student. Born and bred in QwaQwa, Free State, she now studies at UCT. It was reading that helped her discover her love for creative writing at the tender age of seven. Soon after that, she developed a love for acting and other art forms. She's a firm believer that she can do anything through Christ who strengthens her, and that sometimes all one needs is a journal.

Find her on [LinkedIn](#).



# Nomajuba Hlatshwayo

## In The Mirror

Hi. I wish I could say “Good Morning!!” to you too sometimes  
and make you think, even if it’s just for a moment, that  
I am as happy as I usually, naturally am, or at least used to be.

Unfortunately, I can’t lie to or defeat you,  
not when it’s just the two of us. It has taken me  
years and years of trying and failing again and again  
in the name of strength and perseverance,  
**desperately needing** an escape, but I think I’m starting to get it now.

Even the famous mother of success trembles and falls against you  
just as easily as my happiness, sense of identity, voice, humour, power, confidence and entire  
being did. So hi, just hello self.

I’m still broken, hurt, weak,  
just as I have been for the past two years,  
looking at you, my own reflection in a small, filthy mirror,  
shadow of my former self: the woman  
I was before I was betrayed by the one man  
who had my heart and I was terrified,  
before I walked into a heavily demarcated yard a happy child  
and crawled out a numb, colonised excuse for a being.

The young woman I was when my hair was still mine,  
when my hands were without scars and bruises,  
when I was in content with who I was,  
when I was still capable of decision-making,  
when I still had a voice,  
when I was still free.

Before I was a liar, a deceiver, a manipulator, a backstabber,  
a burden, self-centred, two-faced, powerless, alone,  
**helpless**, submissive...  
**before** I became everything I am today,  
everything I see in this mirror right now,  
everything I had to do and become to “survive”.

Hell! Before the light in me **died** and my darkest,  
most destructive parts invited you in here and  
locked the damn door.  
Now it’s just the two of us.  
I have no desire to be with anyone else,  
to let anyone else in.

The world shouldn’t see me this dead.  
Not when this mirror shows you so clearly that  
my tears can blur you away no more.  
So, I guess this is, for yet another day, our own  
“**Please do** make yourself at home...” moment.



I will **not** fight that, fight you anymore.  
In here nobody can see us so they can't pretend  
to understand, make empty promises, worry, lie, **leave me**.

It's just me in front of you, crying and slowly accepting  
the fact that being just dead must be much better  
than being a dead-girl-walking.  
No one can break this door and pull me back,  
not now that I'm this far gone.

## Evil Prevails

When we take no opportunity because we say we see none.  
When we take no chances because we think we stand none.  
When we wish for change but we don't stand to see it done,  
Because we expect it from someone else who we suppose is bound by some obligation  
Or qualification or just compassion for our need for mitigation in life.  
Evil prevails.

It prevails when I choose to rather let fruit rot before my eyes than to share some  
With a hungry stranger because I owe him nothing.  
It prevails through ignoring her helpless cry from the street  
As she begged for her life, thinking I couldn't have done a thing.  
It prevails when I look away from a freezing, starving child  
Towards the blazing fire where my unpreferred clothes burn and feel nothing.  
It prevails when a perpetrator hurts me and I say nothing.

Evil prevails where there is absence of love.  
Where discrimination and segregation matter more than compassion and togetherness.  
Where status weighs more than humanity and arrogance more than happiness.  
It prevails where there's mistrust.  
Where deception for personal gain reigns over guidance towards multinational benefit.  
Where fear reigns over hope and proof is preferable to truth.  
Where lies and betrayal grow in the midst of injustice  
And murder is used to protect devious secrets.

It prevails not only when we declare war against one another  
But also when we fail to stand together for peace.  
It prevails not when we stop preaching the right ways  
But when we fail to practice them.  
It prevails not when we are not able  
But when we are able and yet not willing.  
It prevails when good people do nothing.



# Nomajuba Hlatshwayo

## I Dare You

I dare you to stand.  
Beaten, broken, bruised  
As you are  
I dare you to walk.  
Walk. Let your legs carry you  
To my door and knock.

Let those bloody, bare hands  
Slam my door so I can unlock  
And open it to find your hollow soul.  
I dare you to look at me.  
I dare you to dare me to act.  
Hurt, ashamed, wronged  
As you've been  
Dare me to react.  
Dare me to hold out my hand  
And pull you up and let you in.

Dare me to feel your pain  
When I look at my door  
Where your blood remains.  
Dare me to believe you,  
And believe in you  
As I dare you to believe in yourself.

Dare me to be your strength,  
To help you heal  
And seek justice for you  
As I dare you to let your voice be heard.  
Dare me to realise that your pain is mine.

Dare me to remember that we only have each other.  
Dare me to know that we are one,  
So we can dare us, dare ourselves, dare each other  
To stand together.

I dare you to speak.  
I dare you to dare me to listen.





# Benito Trollip

Having been raised by astounding parents, Benito has had encouragement for all the weird and wonderful things he attempted. He makes time to write poems and blogs to give some form to his experiences. He has a mild obsession with flamingos and crosswords – all serving him well when he needs something to write about! He has learned to be thankful for all his experiences as they give him new perspectives and ideas. The structure and sound of words will forever captivate him and will no doubt lead to wonderful things.

Benito is a PhD candidate in Linguistics at North-West University and a researcher in Afrikaans Digital Language Resources at the South African Centre for Digital Language Resources (SADiLaR).

Find him on [LinkedIn](#) and [SADiLaR's website](#).



## Amper Lepoop

*geskryf op die geelste papier met die geelste pen*

As 'n naam, as 'n mens  
nes die nienaam-niemens  
met 'n net-net-heid van gees  
en 'n geringe graad van jywees  
kul 'n bietjie daar en 'n bietjie hier  
en jou verbeelding kan jou in ontelbare rigtings stuur

## by 'n blou stoel, blou

in my gedagtes is hy vlootblou, fluweel, amper te verleidelik  
dalk nog sonder naam, maar met 'n vaste staanplek  
die een plek in hierdie versmorende heelal waar ek kan  
beluister, beduister, beliggaam en bestaan vir nou  
in hierdie een stoel, die blou

ek weet plek, ruimte en tyd is nooit dieselfde nie  
dink migrerende voëls, Hans Faverey, Heraclitus  
maar dit keer my nie om die vlootblouheid te omarm nie  
met verterende verlange skree my binneste vir nog blou  
kan een stoel dié plek wees waar ek kan wees sonder berou?

uiteraard gaan 'n blou stoel met 'n blou dubbellontkers gepaard  
hy ruik na die son en vryheid, al my klaargeskryfde briewe  
in die vlamme verewig ek elke goeie wens vir elke mens  
maar dit is moeilik alleen in hierdie blou, om net te dink  
sonder om te verbeel, te fantaseer oor wat kan wees in 'n oogwink

aangewese op my wedywering om vandag beter te wees  
om te weet dat gister en môre vormvry is  
bly ek bloustoelsittend vir 'n rukkie langer as aanvanklik bedoel  
want ek weet nie wat buite die blou wag nie  
dit is dalk nie wys om heeldyd net die slegste te verwag nie

onseremonieel gaan buite-die-blou-dinge gewoon aan  
daar is nie eintlik iets wat net vir my wag nie  
ek wil glo daar is mense of dinge wat asems ophou  
belangrike vervullende dinge wat net vir my dophou  
genadiglik is ek verlos en weet vrede en 'n bietjie trane wag in die wegsak in die blou.



# Aisha Ibrahim Abdullahi

Aisha Ibrahim Abdullahi, also known as Shatu, is an 18-year-old psychology student from Kano, Nigeria. She began writing in the form of essays in secondary school. Her writing explores generally untold stories from her community along with topics of feminism, tribalism, and teenage mental health issues.

Aisha aspires to continue telling unheard stories that will help bring many serious issues in her community to light, as well as inspiring young girls from similar backgrounds in the literary arts.

Find Aisha on [Facebook](#).



## Tears of a Fountain

*A name should be more than just a unique form of identification.  
If it's so important, we should burden ourselves  
with the responsibility to live up to the meanings of our names,  
then at least in our good traits  
will we be able to be unique.*

Whenever 'she who is gentle [mild-mannered]' wept in her position of face  
in hands and elbows on thighs, the tears rolled down her face,  
trickled down her arms, and fell on the curve of the cool cast stone beneath her  
if the salty teardrops did not roll at such a leisurely pace,  
perhaps a small puddle would have formed  
beneath her drooped face.

But they evaporated before gravity oppressed them down,  
at least that's what the woman thought,  
a far fetched observation it was.  
Almost as far-fetched as the observation that the crying girl,  
'she who is gentle'  
was unhappy.

She watched her from a safe distance,  
the opposite side of the fountain,  
through the pouring water and the few gaps barely present.  
'She who is gentle' was not aware that there was another person  
seated on the fountain when she came,  
she had not cared either.  
She had sat and wept for five minutes straight,  
dabbing her puffy eyes and flushed cheeks and  
occasionally moist forehead tenderly with a soft tissue.

It felt as if on that fairy-tale fountain  
all of life was merely unreal and  
only what was permitted could have an effect, to both women.  
When 'she who is gentle' ceased her tears  
she had sat blankly staring before her,  
but I doubt the plain shrub housing a grasshopper or two  
felt flattered or uncomfortable from her lasting gawk  
as though her eyes watched her front  
her attention was in a place lacking not only a shrub  
but a fountain and an attentive looker-on.

The street lights shone over them but  
the moonlight outshone in the fountain,  
it stared at its reflection in the serene water.  
Its figure was slightly morphed into a wavier version but  
its luminous glow resonated louder than the girl's sorrowful emotions,  
the woman's nostalgic observation, and  
even the shrub's voiceless daydreams of blooming large  
beautiful red roses so that when next someone stared  
they would behold.



With a different name comes a different person  
and if to say it was '*she who is lively*' who was present  
at that very moment when the girl turned her head and  
saw a woman staring, from the opposite side of the fountain,  
at her then she perhaps, if not only for the sake of the name,  
would have resonated an aura of more agreeableness  
than a gentle spirit could, and the woman would feel  
the smile she offered more accepted with a welcome  
rather than an insincere reception done solely  
for the purpose of fulfilling societal protocol.

Her returned smile would yield courage to the woman  
to walk halfway round the fountain to offer a hug to  
'*she who is lively*' and have the accepted hug be so  
sentimental that the ceased tears would return and she would cry some more.  
Then, in the light of the moment and in the agreeable  
trait of the bearer of the name they would sit and  
have her share, not all but, that she has tried and tried and tried and failed that she is  
hopeless, that she is utterly hopeless.

And the woman would feel compelled,  
more from the sore sight of lost hope in the youth  
than the happenings in her life  
(which to say the least could compel her just as powerfully),  
to tell her that she should fight her hopelessness,  
that she should die being hopeful.  
That in hope does life live and in the end, is where all hope is lost.  
And a sensation of joyful despair would envelop the two,  
igniting the lost hope in one and  
extinguishing the unlost in the other.

But such simply could not be for one named and known for being '*gentle*'.  
For upon feeling that irking feeling  
one gets when the eyes of another have been placed on her and  
with intensity are being used to watch her then  
turning to find just that with the woman,  
she went pale with fright.

She rose from her seat, forgetting her foggy eyes and  
puffy face and walked away quicker and quicker wondering,  
with a sick knot in her stomach,  
how long she had been sitting there,  
watching her.





## Cara Helene

Graduated with a BA in English, Cara Helene now crafts with words and creates illustrations through excessive consumption of tea fuel. A copywriter by day, author and digital artist by night, she enjoys the nerdy side of life and constantly exploring new topics and hobbies. Cara lives on a small family farm outside Durban in the company of many animals and enjoys occasional adventures during board game nights.

Cara's poetry is featured in the anthology *Twenty-five Years of Freedom* (2019) and she published her novel *The Lying Librarian* in 2015. In 2021, she designed the illustrations for the children's book *Cloud Gazing* written by Nitasha Ramparsad, which is about breaking gender stereotypes in career choices. See her artwork on page 89.

Find Cara's artwork and projects on her [website](#) and follow her on [Instagram](#).





## Meisie's Minutiae

Braais by firelight in the Transkei  
Petrichor drips through the air  
She walks the Wild Coast for shells  
She roams  
In the valley of a Thousand Hills

She reads her adventure books  
She hides  
She watches effervescence  
She glides  
Natal sands between her toes  
White waves wash her feet  
She sinks  
Blowing steam over her glasses

She paints her nails to curb nerves  
Books weigh on her shoulders  
She studies  
Sizzling potjie on the stove

Her painted fingernails curl her cup  
She cries  
Plaits in her hair  
She sokkies alone in the kitchen  
She graduates with distinctions  
She clutches manes of horses  
She rides



## The Dance

Her eyes smiled  
Her smile sang  
New emotion jerked her feet to move  
And she danced a dance of solitude

Her heart longed  
Her dance slowed  
Her beauty grew with maturity  
But death-like shadow mimicked her ominously

He saw her  
She saw him  
Heartbeats building began a bolder dance  
As each repeatedly stole a mid-step glance

She loved him  
He loved her  
Through time in sync their steps moved free  
The shadow forgotten in their dance of glee

She loved him  
He loved her  
Through time in sync their steps moved free  
The shadow forgotten in their dance of glee

Her stomach swelled  
His heart soared  
Their steps prepared another to follow  
But then below appeared the shadow

His dance ended  
Her smile cried  
Sorrow caused her an inner feud  
And she danced a dance of solitude



## Neema Masinde

Neema Masinde is a 20-year-old Kenyan living in South Africa. She studies Medicine at the University of Cape Town. Her prose poem featured here was a finalist in the writing competition at the 2021 Res4Res Student Festival.

Neema has a passion for words and loves to read and write moving pieces. For her, writing is cathartic self-expression and a way to explore her unanswered questions about the human condition. She wants to write more beautifully and to move people with her words. She hopes to become a better writer and to have more people read her work.



## I Didn't Leave

Ice cold. Strong winds. Sheets of heavy rain.

Bare skin.

Under a leaky roof, inside thin walls, no power, no heat. Teeth chattering, limbs quivering, hope dwindling. I might die here.

He has locked me in and taken my key and is gone. He took my clothes and the blankets with him. He might not come back this time.

Light.

I must find a source of light. I open my shut eyes. No difference. I'm too cold to move. I need to do something, anything, but I'm helpless; unable to do anything except wait – wait for a man that may or may not return.

I think I'm going to die here.

Numb.

The cold has become numb, my blood at a standstill. The feeling in my digits, my limbs, my face, my ears, is gone. I should move around, but the stillness is sweet. The numbness is too sweet. I begin to drift. I drift off to happier places, warmer places, to places in the past, to a time when the sun caressed my skin. I drift...

Time has passed. How much?

I force my eyes open. Light! I can see some light creeping in through the cracks in the corners of the wall. I crane my neck to the left, something that requires all my effort. I'm looking for the window from which the sunlight will come. I see no window. Where has the window gone?

Boards of wood and nails occupy the space from which the light should come.

He boarded them shut. The bastard.

A lonely tear escapes my right eye, meanders down my cheek and settles at the base of my chin. I believed I had no tears left to shed. I thought I had nothing left to lose. I thought I had nothing left.

I drift away again. Darkness settles around me, and then makes its way into me. The darkness is greedy. I am unable to fight it, and I let it carry me away...

Rumbling.

I am pulled to consciousness by a loud groan that stems from deep within my bowels. Food. The chill that is now in my bones becomes insignificant and thoughts of nourishment become the focus of my mind.



Hungry.

There must be something to eat. Anything. I'm weak. I'm too weak to look. I lift my head and turn my neck towards the cupboards. They are wide open. Odd. I keep them closed.

Empty.

I close my eyes and wait for death.

Thirst.

A burning in my throat, hotter than anything I have ever known. My lips, my tongue, my throat, drier than the Gobi. I start to dream about the rain that was pouring outside. When did it stop? I imagine standing outside while it pours, opening my mouth, sticking out my tongue, turning my head to the heavens. Drinking. Drinking to my fill, taking in all that the sky offers.

I want to sleep but the burning in my throat is too strong. I want to escape. With each passing second, with each ragged breath, requiring all the strength that my body can muster, the thought of death becomes sweeter.

No one else besides him knows I'm here. There is no one else. He never let me have anyone else. He said he would take care of me.

Funny. The devil himself is my guardian angel. My only hope for survival is in the hands of the man keeping me captive and sucking my life away.

Light.

A stream of light brings me back. I reach out to Death, ready to latch onto him. But the worn safari boot by the door is not his. He's back, and slowly making his way towards me.

First relief comes, and then fear. The relief shrinks as he approaches, but the fear grows. I don't know what he's going to do this time, but I know I am right to be afraid.



THE JOURNAL OF AFRICAN YOUTH LITERATURE

# SHORT STORIES





# Anne G Tinargwo

Anne Gertrude Tinargwo is 20 years old and is currently completing her LLB at Unisa. She has always been a fan of reading, which later evolved into a love of writing. She started writing in the ninth grade and the positive feedback from close friends encouraged her to take it one step further and share her writing. You can find some of her short stories on Wattpad. Anne enjoys writing in various genres and ventures into romance, the paranormal, mystery, and LGBTQ+ themes. She says, “I hope people enjoy my work as much as I loved writing it.”

Find Anne on [LinkedIn](#).



## A Search for the Closet's Key

30 November 2006. That was a week ago, yet Themba could still feel all the emotions that had bubbled up inside his heart that day. From surprise to elation, but which all was crumpled down with sadness as realisation struck. He had gone through almost all emotions known to humans in less than two minutes.

30 November 2006. The day when basic human rights were realised and accepted. The day when many people would not have to skip their own country for their love to be recognised in the eyes of the law. It was the day South Africa legalised same-sex marriage.

While others celebrated the new law, some people were disgruntled, and they felt no need to hide their anger and disgust. Those people included Themba's family.

They had been sitting in the living room – him, his sister, and mother and father when the legalisation became a topic on the news. As the news anchor announced it, Themba's mother was the first to scoff in disgust before clicking her tongue. A ghost of a smile on Themba's face that would have soon formed into a wide grin disappeared completely as he heard his mother's expression of disgust.

"You see? Do you see this?" she fussed, finger pointing at the screen as she looked at her husband. "Like this country hasn't taken enough rubbish, now this! They take this nonsense from overseas and bring it here. They bring filth in Africa. We are being tested. We are really being tested!" she yelled before slanting her head towards the floor and made a spitting gesture.

In response, Themba's father shook his head slowly as he faced the screen, muttering a response that harmonised with his wife's homophobic statement.

"Hawu, mama," Themba's sister, Xabisa spoke. "I don't see anything wrong with this. If two people love each other, why shouldn't they marry? You always say that everyone should taste the sweet fruits of love and marriage, so why shouldn't they?"

Themba's smile that had once disappeared soon returned to his face, but once again vanished when his mother spoke again. Her venomous tone was sharper than before. "If I should ever hear such nonsense coming out of your mouth again, I swear, I will do something that will make you regret me being your mother. No child of mine is going to support such filth in my house."

"Mama..." Xabisa had started to say but she was quickly interrupted by her father.

"Do not speak back to your mother, especially on such a subject. We are cultured people and we do not support such... confusion."

Xabisa huffed and turned her attention back to the TV in anger while Themba just sat there, letting his parents' words sink in.

It was the first time that the topic of homosexuality had actually been spoken about in their home, and it was also the first time Themba learnt what his parents thought of it. It only made him more anxious.



On a morning like most others, Themba had woken up and prepared for school before going to the kitchen where his mother would have already prepared a bowl of peanut butter porridge. He greeted her as he sat on a high stool near the kitchen table. His mother smiled and greeted him back before serving him a bowl of porridge.





He ate slowly as his thoughts casually landed on last week's conversation. Judging from what had occurred, he knew he would not be accepted by his parents – should he come out of the closet. Xabisa would, he already knew that, but her acceptance of his sexuality would not be enough. He loved his parents, and he couldn't imagine living his life being hated by them for how he was born.

"Themba," came his mother's voice, interrupting his thoughts. He looked at her and her eyes darted downwards, signaling at the bowl in front of him. "Eat faster, my child, or you'll be late for school," she said with a smile before continuing her kitchen work.

Themba looked at her as she worked, noting the big difference between the smile she usually wore and the anger she had expressed last week. His heart raced faster as the thought of that anger being directed at him crossed his mind.

"Morning," came Xabisa's voice from behind him. He turned to look at her and was surprised to see her still in her nightwear.

"Aren't you prepared to go to work yet?" his mother asked the same question that was lingering in his mind.

She shook her head with a yawn as she stretched and sat beside Themba. "I'm off today."

Her mother hummed in response before serving her a bowl of porridge.

"Did you guys hear what happened yesterday at the Khambules?" Xabisa asked. Her mother turned around to face her, already showing interest in the topic. "Njabulo visited his parents yesterday, but apparently, not even two hours passed before his parents started yelling and literally kicked him out of the house. He swore at them before getting in his car and driving off."

"Why?" her mother asked as she put a fist on her round hip, eyebrows tightly furrowed.

Xabisa swallowed a spoonful of her porridge before answering. "Apparently, he's gay, and he had come to tell his parents he would be getting married soon to another man now that the law allows it. His parents were obviously not happy, and he was immediately kicked out and apparently disowned. Poor thing."

Themba's brows had raised the minute he heard Njabulo's name. He was one of those names in the village that many parents used as an example to encourage their children to study harder. A man who many people looked up to. Someone born in a simple household in a simple village who grew up to be a successful businessman in the city.

To hear that Njabulo was also gay had momentarily made Themba feel a little less alone, but when he heard the outcome of his coming out, his heart immediately dropped, once again throwing him into a pit of doubt, fear and despair. He had no doubt he would also suffer Njabulo's fate should he decide to come out. He couldn't stand the thought of being away from his family. He couldn't imagine standing on his own without them. Perhaps he would have to wait, just like Njabulo did. He only had two years of high school left anyway. After studying further and being stable, perhaps then he would be able to come out to his parents.

"Poor thing?" suddenly came the sharp voice of Themba's mother. "Poor thing, my foot, man! Kicking him out was not enough! If he was my son, I would have..." she suddenly paused as she brought her curved hands up near her chest and shook them slightly, making a choking gesture. Themba subtly gulped, knowing very well what she meant. She huffed as she dropped her hands and turned around to face the sink.



## Anne G Tinargwo

“It must be the city. He must have been brainwashed by possessed people from the city. He would have never become like that if he continued staying here in the village.”

“No, mama,” Xabisa protested, “No matter where he would have stayed, he would still be who he is. He was born like that and...”

“Hey! Hey! Hey!” her mother suddenly interrupted her, turning around quickly to face her. “I’ve warned you not to say those kinds of things in support of that nonsense. Otherwise, I’ll do the same thing that Njabulo’s parents did to him!” she fumed before her eyes darted towards Themba, who had stopped eating when his sister came in. “Themba, finish your food and quickly go to school.”

Themba had long lost his appetite, but he knew better than to refuse food dished for him by his mother, especially in front of her. If eating slowly was not going to get him to school late, his mother’s lecture on not wasting food would. He quickly cleaned his plate just for the sake of finishing and stood up.

He grabbed his school bag, but before he could sling it over his shoulder, his sister, who was still eating, called his name. He turned towards her and she opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. A few seconds went by and she still hadn’t said a word. She threw a glance towards her mother who was still busy at the sink then looked back at him again. Her eyes seemed to say a lot, but Themba could hardly interpret what they were trying to say, although he thought he detected a hint of pity in them.

“Ha-have a good day, neh?” she finally spoke before giving him a small smile.

Confused because he was certain that’s not all she wanted to say, Themba’s brows furrowed. “Yah,” he replied, “Thank you. You too.” He finally carried his bag and made his way out of the house.

Noting that his best friend, Samukelo, wasn’t already waiting for him outside, he already knew he was still early. Samukelo lived about a block down from his own home and was not very conscious about time.

Shoving his hands into the pockets of his school pants, Themba made his way down the road until he reached Samukelo’s place. Before he could even reach his gate, he saw Samukelo coming out with his school bag slung over one arm. Themba smiled as soon as his eyes fixed on him and his heart started beating a lot faster, practically pulsating inside his chest.

Samukelo had been one of those factors that made Themba realize that he was gay. His zero interest in girls had been a big hint. Instead of desiring girls in his school or any other girl for that matter, he found himself closely watching his best friend. At first, he tried brushing it off as friendly admiration, but when Themba found himself fantasizing about him and being extremely jealous of any girl Samukelo ever got close to, he knew it was more than that.

Of course, he would never tell him. Samukelo was one of those people he feared losing, should he come out of the closet. He might be able take ridicule from others, but he couldn’t imagine a world where Samukelo would look at him with disgust or disdain. That would definitely crush him.

He watched as Samukelo closed the gate of his home and faced him with a smile. “Hey, man!”, Samukelo greeted him with a cheery smile, putting his fist up then extending it towards Themba.

Themba smiled before bumping his fist with Samukelo’s. “Samu,” he acknowledged him with a bigger smile. “Someone’s a little cheery today, and might I also mention, a lot earlier than usual.”





Samukelo chuckled lightly as they started walking. “What can I say, my friend? It’s a beautiful day, and it wouldn’t hurt me to be almost as punctual as you are,” he said with a big grin as he lightly elbowed Themba.

“This new attitude of yours wouldn’t have anything to do with Noluntu, would it?” he asked, feeling the little sparks of envy bubbling up inside of him at the mention of her name.

Samukelo’s smile brightened, only worsening Themba’s jealousy. He had known Samu his whole life, and even then, he doubted that just the mention of his name could make him smile that much.

“Maybe,” Samukelo sang as he shrugged his shoulders. “Love can change a man, Themba. Love can change a man.”

“Perhaps, but I would like to remind you that you are not a man,; you are still a boy,” Themba teased.

Samukelo laughed and shook his head. “Trust me, Themba, there’s nothing boyish about me,” he said with a wink. The simple gesture made Themba feel warm inside.

“And anyway, when are you going to get yourself a girlfriend?” Samukelo asked. Themba immediately felt his body tense up, “I’ve never once seen you showing any interest in a girl. I mean, I’m sure there are many girls who would be willing to be yours. You are quite good looking, after all. Well, not more good looking than me, but still.”

Themba smiled at the compliment and couldn’t help but shake his head at his friend’s prideful comment. “I just haven’t met any girl that sparked my interest.”

Samukelo’s brows raised a little before furrowing as a teasing smile played on his lips. “Oh, wow. Someone is a little picky.”

“I’m not picky. I just...” he took a pause before continuing, “have my preferences.”

“Oh?”, Samukelo raised a brow. “And what are these preferences, dear friend? You are not waiting for some fancy-dressed, funny-talking girl from the city, are you?” he joked.

Themba shrugged in response. Samukelo chuckled and slung an arm over Themba’s shoulder. Themba internally prayed that he wouldn’t hear the thumping of his heart.

“Oh, friend of mine. You aim for the unattainable.”

“I’m not aiming for it, just simply wishing for it. I know better than to think or try to attain it,” Themba mumbled, but it was loud enough for Samukelo to hear, which made his smile falter a bit.

He let go of Themba, and they walked in silence for a minute or two.

“Look, I was joking,” he suddenly broke the silence, “It’s not impossible for you to get any girl that you want. Whether she is from here or the city.”

Themba shook his head. “No... the person that I want, I can never get.”

Samukelo’s eyes widened a bit. “Themba, are you in love someone?”

Themba chuckled; not an ounce of humor was present in his tone. “Don’t worry about it, man. Tell me about your plans with Noluntu. Do you see this going somewhere?” he asked, trying to change the topic. He succeeded. As soon as Themba had asked that, Samukelo grinned and started yapping on and on about Noluntu.



## Anne G Tinargwo

Soon, they found themselves in front of the gates of their school. They had hardly made it inside when Themba saw a girl running towards them. As she got closer, her features became more familiar to him. Shoulder length hair, plaited in neat cornrows, a beaming smile, making the corners of her eyes slightly crease, but accentuating the twinkle in them, a well-developed, voluptuous body (perhaps, too developed for her age) that would not cease to go unnoticed despite the dull mixture of colors of the lemon yellow shirt and green school skirt. It was none other than Noluntu. One of the girls among many who Themba secretly considered rivals in having Samukelo's attention.

Noluntu finally reached them, and without as much as a greeting or a nod of acknowledgement towards Themba, she immediately threw herself into Samukelo's arms. Samukelo cackled as he immediately wrapped his arms around her waist, catching her rather easily. The sight made Themba subconsciously frown.

After a few kisses and giggles and more embracing, the couple finally let go of each other and turned to Themba, who immediately wiped away his frown and replaced it with a friendly but rather forced smile. He could only hope that they wouldn't see through it, and by the looks of it, they didn't.

Noluntu finally acknowledged Themba and greeted him with a big smile. A smile he knew would disappear the minute she knew of his feelings for her boyfriend. He greeted her back before looking at Samukelo. "I'm going to get to class," he said, using his thumb to point behind him.

"Oh, come on. Stay a little longer. The bell hasn't even rung yet," Samukelo whined, his face pleading with him.

For a moment, Themba considered staying, but as soon as his eye landed on Noluntu, whose face clearly showed she wasn't happy with the idea, he changed his mind. "No, I have homework that I didn't do. I'll just find a class to get it done before the bell rings," he lied.

Samukelo raised a brow. "You didn't do your homework? Could you at least come up with a better lie? Is there someone you want to meet, perhaps?" he suggested, wiggling his eyebrows.

Themba shook his head. "No. I just had too much work yesterday and dozed off late and didn't get the chance to finish up my homework," he lied again. "I'll see you later." With that, he turned and made his way to class. He stopped when Samukelo called his name and turned around to see him running after him while Noluntu stood where he had left her. He tried to ignore the unhappy look on her face.

Samukelo finally stopped in front of him and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Look," he said in a hushed tone as if he feared someone would hear him, "You and I still need to talk about that person you like," he smiled.

Themba stayed silent for a while before looking down. A second later, he looked into Samukelo's eyes and shook his head. "No. It's better that we don't. You should probably go back to Noluntu. She's waiting for you." He stepped back, allowing his friend's hand to drop from his shoulder and walked away.

He was sure that Samukelo was not surprised when he made an excuse to leave. He always did that whenever his girlfriend was around. Not because he didn't want to be a third wheel, but because he feared that his feelings would be found out. From what he knew, girls were adept at seeing someone's true feelings. Though he was sure he was good at hiding his own feelings, he didn't want to take the risk of them ever being found out. What he felt for Samukelo was a secret he would have to die with for the sake of the preservation of their friendship.





Like any other Thursday, the day went by slowly, and the students did not do much to hide the fatigue they felt for the amount of work they had the entire week. As soon as the bell rang, they all perked up, excited by the idea of being able to go back home and rest.

Themba wasted no time getting out the school gates and rushing home. This was an attempt not to run into Samukelo because he knew he would coax him to walk together with him and Noluntu. He hated that Samukelo constantly tried to get him close to his girlfriend. Themba could really care less about her or anyone else who Samukelo had ever dated or will date. He knew very well that he was jealous, he no longer tried denying it, but it never changed the fact that Samukelo still had a girlfriend. This was the only reason he and Samukelo sometimes no longer walked together back home.

Themba missed those times when it was just him and Samukelo. A time when all they knew was each other's companionship. A time when both of them hardly cared about love. A time when Themba hardly knew about love. Now, he found himself rejoicing when Samukelo would break up with a girl and dreading the moments where he would tell him he had a new girlfriend.

Themba finally arrived home and found his mother and sister both sitting in the living room. His sister slouched on the couch, remote in hand, as she flipped through the channels on the television. His mother sat cross-legged opposite where Xabisa was sitting, a novel in hand and reading glasses cutely perched on her nose. When she noticed his presence, she looked at him over her glasses and smiled. "Hi, my baby. How was school?"

Themba smiled back. "It was good. Hey, Xabi," he greeted Xabisa, who only gave him a wave in return, still focused on the TV as she continued surfing through channels.

Themba went into his room and changed out of his school uniform before putting on something casual. He went into the kitchen, knowing that his mother would have already prepared lunch for him. He saw two covered plates of food on the table and uncovered one of them. Rice with tinned pilchards and chakalaka. One of his favorite meals. He covered the plate before warming it up. As Themba waited for his food to heat, he went back into his bedroom and took out a few books to do his homework.

He went back into the kitchen again and sat with the now warm food on the table. He alternated between eating and writing, careful not to spill any food on the pages of his books. After he was done eating, Themba took his plate to the sink, washed it, and then went back to sit at the table again to finish off his homework.

Themba let out a big huff after he was done and stood up, stretching as he did so. He grabbed a notebook and a pen and started making his way out of the kitchen. He went into the living room to let his mother know where he was going. He found her now staring at the TV screen along with Xabisa. Her novel and reading glasses were now placed on her lap. Xabisa was still slouched on the couch, the only difference from a while ago being the position of her body. She often complained of back problems, and her mother told her countless times that it was because of her slouching. It was obvious she wasn't taking that into consideration.

"Mama, I'm going to the library," Themba told her as he started making his way out.

"Okay, my baby," she replied, eyes still focused on the TV.

Themba was about to leave when he suddenly remembered something. He turned back and walked towards the couch that Xabisa was slouching on. "Xabi," he called her, and she hummed in response. "What did you want to tell me this morning?"

Xabi finally gave Themba her full attention. "Heh?"



## Anne G Tinargwo

“This morning, you wished me a good day, but I had a feeling that you wanted to say something else. Maybe you thought I was running late. What did you want to say?” he asked. At this, his mother also turned her attention away from the TV and looked at the two siblings.

Xabisa looked at Themba with slightly widened eyes as if to silently reprimand him. “You are mistaken, Themba. I really was just wishing you a good day.”

Themba cocked a brow. “But you hardly ever do that.”

“Hardly, not never. It was one of those days that I decided to wish you a good day. I know how hectic grade ten can get. That’s why.” Themba stared at her for a while.

“I’m sure my baby is handling it just fine. He always has,” his mother said fondly. “Time goes by so fast, neh? Soon you’ll be done with school, and you’ll move out and start a family, unlike your sister here,” she teased playfully.

“Eish, mama,” Xabisa groaned, “I told you, I’m still saving up money for a new place. For now, let me enjoy mooching.”

“Don’t you think it’s time you actually thought of getting married instead of thinking of living alone? Most girls your age have already started families.”

“Hayi, mama. I told you, I haven’t found the right man and most of the girls you speak of got pregnant while still in high school.”

“And do you think you will find this right man when all the housework you ever do is wash your own plate and just slouch on your free days?”

Xabisa laughed. “If he loves me, he won’t mind.”

“If you don’t get married anytime soon, by the time you do get married, your womb would have dried up. You’ll get kicked out by your husband and come back here.”

“And then I get to eat your delicious cooking and get to slouch, so in the end, I’ll win,” she joked. Her mother shook her head with a smile and turned her attention back to the TV.

Themba smiled and bid them goodbye again before going out and heading to the library after making sure that his library card was safely tucked in his pocket.

He spent at least three hours in the library before he decided to go back home. It was getting dark, after all. When he got back home, he found his mother in the kitchen, preparing dinner and his father, now back from work, sitting in the living room with his sister now sitting upright. He greeted his father and started making his way to his room.

“Oh, Themba, whatever happened to you and Samukelo? I hardly see you with him nowadays. You two are not fighting, are you, boy?” his father asked before he could get to his room.

“Oh, no,” he replied as he shook his head, chortling lightly, “He has a girlfriend, so I just try to give him space.”

“Yoh! Samu has a girlfriend? That’s too early,” his mother commented from the kitchen.

“No, hardly,” his father said, “Many boys have girlfriends at that age. I remember that I even had my first girlfriend in eighth grade.”

“Yoh!” Xabisa commented simply.





Her father chuckled. “Many boys are curious at that age and basically yearn for girlfriends. It’s not a surprise, really.”

“Ooohhh, so does that mean you also have a girlfriend, Themba?” his mother asked in a playful tone.

“I doubt it,” his father replied. “The boy’s nose is always buried in books. He hardly notices the girls around him. Just lift your head up from your books for a minute, son, and you’ll notice all the beautiful girls around you.”

“Hey, stop trying to distract my brother from his schoolwork,” Xabisa chimed in.

“If he has his priorities straight, he won’t even get distracted just by having a girlfriend. I was a bookworm just like him when I was in school, but I still had a girlfriend. Themba is too much. I’ve never even seen him once looking at a girl in a yearning manner like most boys his age do,” he said before looking at Themba. “You are not gay, are you, boy?”

Themba immediately stiffened at the question even more than he had when this conversation first started. He knew by the smile on his father’s lips that he was just joking, but he still felt his heart thump in fear. Saying ‘yes’ would wreak havoc, but saying ‘no’ would be lying, not only to his family but to himself as well.

Luckily his mother suddenly spoke up, and although Themba was grateful for that save, what she would say next only made him feel worse.

“Of course not! My baby is definitely not that. So what if he’s focused on his books for now? I am sure that one day, he’ll have a girlfriend when he decides it.”

His father chuckled and waved a hand in the air. “I was only joking. I’m sure he knows better than to disappoint us like that.”

“Disappoint? Yoh! I would bring the whole house down!” she fumed, “It’s either I would kick him out, or I would lock him up in his room until he comes back to his senses, if I didn’t kill him first!”

“Mama!” Xabisa interjected.

“I know your brother is not gay, Xabi. I was just saying ‘if’, but I know that ‘if’ is never going to happen. Not in this house. Not with my children.”

Themba had been standing there awkwardly, trying hard not to blink because he knew that as soon as he did, the tears he was desperately trying to hold back would definitely run down his cheeks. He bit his bottom lip, another desperate attempt not to cry. Without looking at anyone, he turned before they could see his glossy eyes. “I’ll be in my room. I need to go over my notes.”

“Okay, my baby. I’ll call you when dinner is ready,” his mother sweetly told him. He was once again surprised at how quickly her venomous tone changed into her normal, sweet one.

He nodded and rushed into his room, forgetting to lock the door. He quickly flopped on his bed and buried his head in his pillow, finally letting his tears out. He muffled his sobs, letting his emotions out silently.

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## Anne G Tinargwo

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He wasn’t prepared for that question. Even if he was, he doubted he would have answered properly. He cursed himself in silence, and for a moment, even cursed his parents for giving birth to him. He had recently found out that they were homophobic to the core, but for his mother to say all that, even theoretically, was hurtful. A stab to the heart.

He panicked when he heard his door being opened. He quickly lifted his head from the pillow and looked to the other side, furiously wiping away his tears. “Themba,” came Xabisa’s hushed tone.

“Hmm,” he hummed in response, still wiping away his tears as discreetly as he could.





“Do you mind if I come in?” she asked, the hushed tone still present in her voice.

After he was sure that he had wiped away the last of his tears, he sat up and faced the door with a forced smile. “No, I don’t mind. Come in.”

Xabisa closed the door behind her, locked it and then walked over to his bed. She sat beside him and was silent for a while. “You don’t have to pretend with me, you know?” she said before looking at him. Themba furrowed his eyebrows in confusion. “Your eyes are red.”

“Oh!” he said in realization, his hand instantly touching his face. “Yeah, I got something in my eye. They must have been irritated from me rubbing them too much, and I’m kind of sleepy too.”

Xabisa stared at him and smiled woefully. “I thought at least you trusted me enough not to pretend in front of me.” Themba didn’t say anything, not knowing how to respond. “You were right. This morning, I did want to say something to you.” Themba nodded, urging her to continue. “Themba, I know you are gay,” she said softly.

Themba’s eyes widened, taken back by the statement. He quickly covered up his surprise by faking a laugh. “What? Yoh, Xabi, that’s crazy! Me? Gay? No, never,” he shook his head.

“So when are you going to trust me enough to actually not lie to me? Or what, do I seem that untrustworthy?”

Themba’s fake smile immediately disappeared. In place, a somber look of guilt marred his features. “No, Xabi. I trust you. I promise that I trust you. How could I not? You are my sister.”

“Then why are you lying to me, holding up this facade the same way you do with our parents?”

Themba’s jaw clenched, and he gulped, looking away. “How... how did you know? I’ve never... I’ve never...” he stammered, looking at his sister once again.

“You’ve never told me? You’ve never hinted at it? You’ve never shown it? Is that what you want to ask me?” she asked. It wasn’t exactly what Themba wanted to ask, but he nodded anyway. She chortled and pinched his cheek. “This is not something you hint at. It’s not a game. It’s who you are. I’ve known for a long time. Perhaps, even longer than you have.”

“If that is so, why have you never said anything?”

“Because it’s something one has to figure out by themselves. Plus I didn’t want to risk the chance of being wrong. You know how I hate being wrong,” she chuckled. “One of the biggest hints... I would have to say... is the way you look at Samukelo. I hardly believe that is just how anyone would look at a friend, even a best friend. And you never seem happy whenever that airhead talks about his girlfriends.”

“It’s not his fault that I’m in love with him. That is my mistake.”

“You are intelligent, but I doubt anyone is smart enough to actually control who they do or don’t fall in love with. Trust me, I know.”

Themba smiled. “Are you perhaps familiar with that because of that lowlife Senzo?”



## Anne G Tinargwo

“Eish, don’t even say his name. Even now, I still wonder why I fell in love with him. The thought that I used to love him makes me shiver even today, but that’s how it is. You can’t control who you love.” She stayed silent before taking one of Themba’s hands in hers then looked into his eyes. “Bottom line here is that... I accept you. Whether you are gay or straight, whether you like boys or girls, heck you could even like a lowlife like Senzo, but that would change nothing. You are still my little brother, and I will always love you, no matter what.”

Themba’s lip trembled at her words, and he tried his hardest to blink the oncoming tears away. To hear that someone actually knew his sexuality and accepted him had him feeling a lot of emotions all at once. Elation and relief were the most prominent.

“You don’t have to hold back tears in front of me. Let it all out, kid. No matter how ugly you look when you cry,” she joked as she pulled him in for a big hug, allowing him to sob silently on her shoulder. She smiled as she lightly patted his head, allowing him to let all his emotions out before she could ask the next question.

After embracing for minutes upon minutes and Xabisa felt that Themba had finally calmed down, she asked him, “When are you going to tell them?” She felt his entire body stiffen in her embrace before he moved away from her.

“I’m not going to tell them. Ever.”

“What?!” Xabisa asked, “Why not, Themba? You need to tell them.”

“No, I don’t. Did you hear them just now? I’ll be disowned, thrown to the streets and forgotten, or worse. It’s better if I keep quiet. I love them. I can’t imagine my life without them. I can’t risk ever losing them.”

“If they love you just as much as you love them, they won’t want to risk losing you either over something you can’t control.”

“They do love me. I know that, but I also know that they can’t accept me as I am and...”

“So, what do you plan to do, Themba?” she interrupted him, “Keeping this to yourself for the rest of your life?”

Themba licked his lips and looked down at his lap, where he was fiddling with his hands. “If that is what I have to do then, yes.”

Xabisa crossed her arms over her chest. “So, what? Do you plan to eradicate your feelings for Samukelo, never fall in love with any other guy, and end up marrying some girl just to make mama and baba happy?”

Themba stayed quiet as he mulled over the question. “Yes,” he replied in a hushed tone.

“Since when did you become so selfish? So, you’ll toy with a girl’s heart, make her believe you love her and even go as far as to marry her just for the sake of never coming out? How different would that make you from Senzo?” she spat.

Themba quickly lifted his head and looked at her. “Don’t compare me to him.”

“Well, you give me no choice. Don’t you remember? He used me, made me believe that I was the one for him, and cheated on me. His cheating and your cheating would not be the same, but it has the same effect. It all ends up with a broken-hearted girl who feels stupid.”

Themba quickly covered his face in shame, more tears threatening to spill from his eyes. “What do you want me to do, Xabi?”





She reached out to him and removed his hands from his face, allowing him to face her. “I want you to disregard other people’s feelings for a while. Think selfishly when making this decision. Do not think of what other people will feel when you decide to show who you are. It’s either people accept you or they don’t. It should not mean much to you if they don’t.”

“I’m scared,” Themba whispered, “I’m very, very scared.”

“You don’t have to be. Not when I’m still here. If they disown you... then they are disowning me too.” Themba’s eyes widened at her statement. “I refuse to let you live an unhappy life. Mama was right, it is about time that I move out, and I will soon. If by then you tell them the truth and they accept you, I’ll move out happily, if they don’t... I’m taking you with me.”

Themba’s eyes widened even more. He opened his mouth to speak but found no words.

“Themba! Xabi! Dinner is ready!” their mother called out to them.

Xabisa sighed and stood up, then walked over to the door. She unlocked it, but before opening it, she turned back to look at Themba then said, “It’s up to you, Themba. An unhappy life in the closet or a joyous life out of it. You don’t even have to search for the key. You already have it. You have to decide whether you keep the door locked or unlock it and set yourself free.”

With that, she opened the door and went out, closing the door behind her. Themba let her words sink in as he closed his eyes. He pondered over her words before finally opening his eyes, a look of determination glinting in them. He had finally made a decision.





## Sithethile Sgwentu

Fifteen-year-old Sithethile Sgwentu was born in Cape Town, South Africa. She has grown up with different perspectives because she has lived with many different relatives. She also attends an international school in Hout Bay where she is the only black girl in her class. From an early age, she was introduced to fantasy fiction and developed a love for reading and writing. She relates to *Harry Potter* as, throughout the series, it is implied that the titular character is different and this confuses and frustrates him because he doesn't know why. It also amazes her that one author can create a whole world all by themselves, just using their imagination.

Sithethile enjoys Roald Dahl and is inspired by this quote from *The Giraffe and the Pelly and Me*: 'A person is a fool to become a writer. Their only compensation is absolute freedom. They have no master except their own soul, and that, I am sure, is why they do it [gender neutral, edited].' "The thought of absolute freedom with nobody to control you both scared and excited me. To think that I could write down anything and the only borders would be the borders of my imagination."



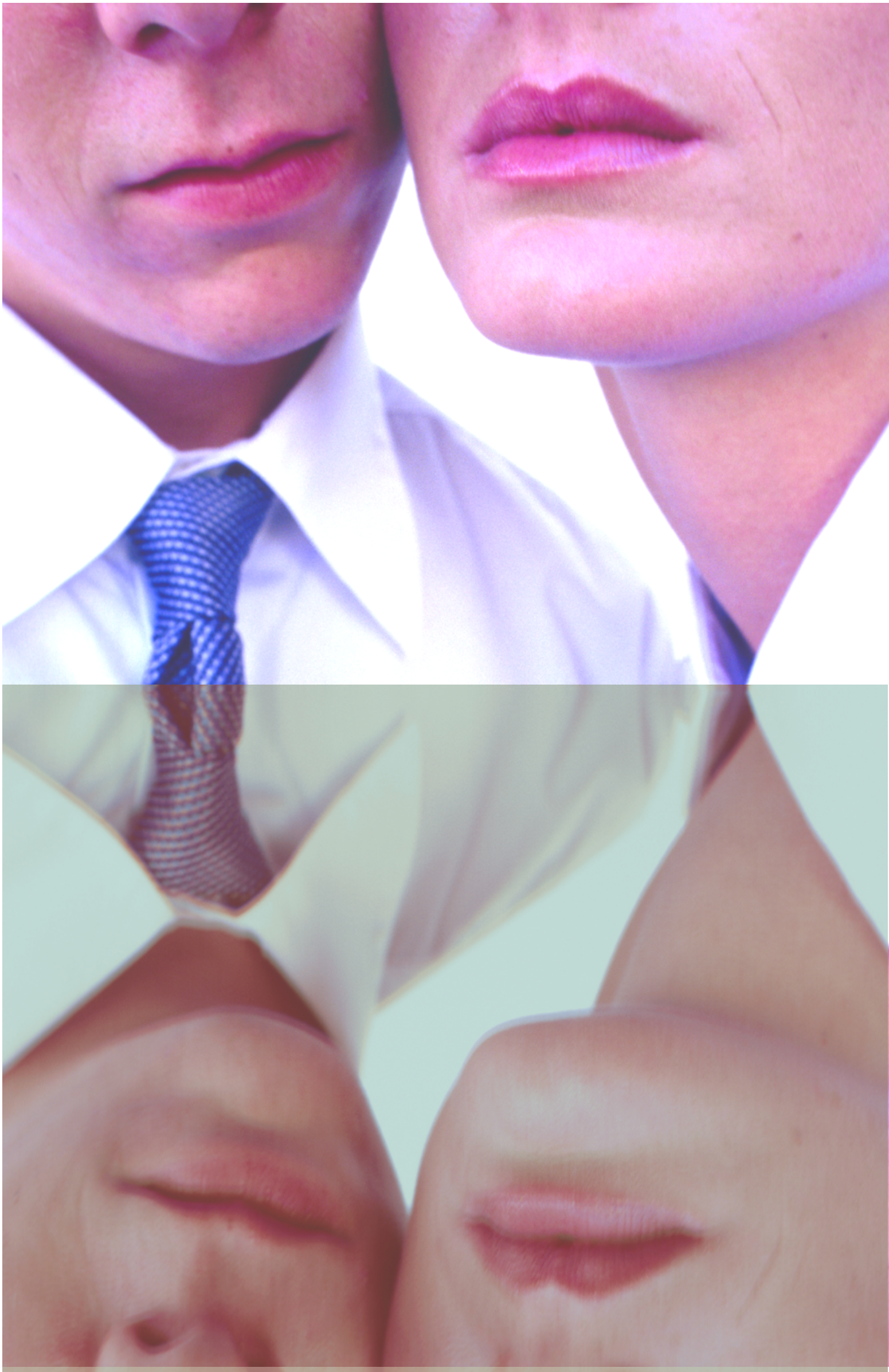


**Introduction to 'Lulu on the Shore' by the author**

When I wrote *Lulu on the Shore*, I took inspiration from *Catcher in the Rye* and my own observations. I chose to write a contemporary teen drama set in South Africa. I wanted to reveal the reality of an imperfect character struggling to find their place in the world, a teenage character who doesn't know where their life is going, but knows they want to stand out.

I think that many people, teenagers and adults, deal with the issues the story deals with and by writing 'Lulu on the shore', I hope that readers will be moved by what I have tried to communicate. Whether that is a sense of relating to the story, a feeling of happiness, sadness, or pity.

I hope people will gain a deeper understanding of themselves and others when they read this story and perhaps experience renewal and a change of perspective.





## Lulu on the Shore

I don't know why I'm writing a diary. It seems a little weird, to be honest, but my English marks are low, so I need to boost them up by writing a long story. I told her I didn't know what to write about, because I honestly don't. I'm no Roald Dickens or whatever, so how was I just supposed to pull a story out of my ass. Honestly, adults are such idiots sometimes. Anyways, the English teacher said that I should write a journal or diary or whatever. She said she would give me three weeks to write the journal and I could draw a five-page story from it.

So today I went sailing at Green Bay Yacht Club. I don't know why it's called that, it's just some sailing club that our school offers. Anyways, Green Bay Harbour is quite small, just a little small place in Cape Town. Nothing special. The people who did sailing were Jules, Luke, Tom, Stephie and me. Oh, also this girl called Lulu, she's kind of weird. Like, she doesn't talk much and you only really hear her name when the teacher was commenting on her good grades and shit. Sorry about the swearing, I guess.

I was letting go, so the sail was getting bigger. I was catching some serious speed, but I couldn't go out of the marina yet. Jules forgot her life jacket, so our sailing instructor Leo had to go back and get it. That's why we were just sailing around the marina until Leo got back. I think everyone else was fooling around close to the deck, trying to capsize and shit. But I was trying to see how fast I could go, plus the water was really cold.

Anyways, I heard some heavy breathing from behind one of the old boats. Of course, the wrong thoughts came into my head, so I hid behind the boat and put my hand against it so my boat would stop moving. More heavy breathing, then a life jacket was floating on the water. Now I was worried, so I listened closer. I heard something unzip. That was it for me. I sailed to the end of the boat and saw Lulu. She was taking off her wetsuit to reveal her yellow swimsuit. The yellow stood out against her dark skin. I snapped out of it realising that she couldn't see me. What was she doing?

"Hey, what the hell are you doing, fam," I said in a joking manner.

She didn't even look at me. She just jumped into the water. What the hell? It was like she was trying to dive for something. I looked at her in the water, she was drowning I thought.

It took me a good five minutes to get her out of the water. She was trying to kick me away. Finally, I got her out and kind of shoved her on the back of my boat. She was knocked out cold. Damn that water was freezing! When I got back on my boat, I took a moment to breathe. Then I helped her, letting her lay down on her back. I pressed my hands on her chest. Water came out of her mouth and nose. With a gasp, she sat up. Blood started to stream from her nose; she gave me a desperate look. She was breathing heavy. I didn't focus on that; I just tied her boat to the back of mine. Was she trying to drown herself?

"Hey, are you ok?" I asked.

She didn't say anything; she just lay down and wiped the blood from her nose.

"Please don't tell anybody anything," she said.

I nodded my head. When I got back to the deck, Leo was finally there.

"Yoh, that took long. Jules, you left your life jacket in the girls' shower! Why on earth did you do that?" asked Leo, as he helped Jules and Stephie. It did take long. It was already 5:30 and sailing was over now.

"Jeez, what the hell happened to her?" asked Luke, who was already loading the boats on the dock.





Everybody turned to see Lulu, who was lying on her back without her wetsuit on. She sat up.

“Er... I was looking at a seal. I was looking at a seal, and I fell and hit my head on that big orange boat. I was knocked out cold, and Easton saved me,” she said.

Everybody nodded their heads. “Thanks, Easton. If she died, that would have been a lot of paperwork,” said Leo. Everybody gave a low chuckle.

It must have been around 10:00. I was lying on my bed, just fooling around on my phone. So I got some whiskey from underneath my bed and took a swig. Ja, I know I wasn’t supposed to drink at fifteen, but who gives a shit anyways? It’s not like I’m an alcoholic or anything. So I was drinking the stuff and fooling around on my phone, and I decided to go on the school WhatsApp. I think Jules made one so that we could ask about homework and shit. So I looked at all the people and found Lulu’s number. Her profile picture was of her doing the peace sign with her two friends. I must have had a lot of shit to drink because I called her. It rang three times, I think.

“Hello,” said Lulu.

“Hey, how are you?” I asked.

“Easton,” she said.

My name wasn’t Easton, it was James, but because everybody’s name was James, people just called me by my surname.

“Yeah, that’s my name,” I said. My words were a little slurred.

“Easton, are you under the influence of alcohol?”

“Yoh, what a fucking angel you are Lulu.”

“Easton, please don’t swear. Why did you even call me anyway?” she said.

“Well, I er just um. I just wanted to know if you tried to drown on purpose,” I said.

“No, I just had a bit of a panic attack, I guess. Why do you care anyways?”

“Salty much. I was just asking.”

“Ok, Easton. I’m fine, thanks. You should stop drinking and get some sleep. I mean, bye, it was nice chatting.” That was a lie.

“Yeah, ok sorry, bye,” I said.

She dropped the call, and I slid the nearly empty whisky under my bed again. Luke was going to be pissed because we were gonna save it for his sleepover on Friday. At least I’ll get a reputation for drinking most of it. That’s gotta be worth something, right?

“East, are you even listening bru?” said Luke.

My head felt like it was pounding. I thought about the habits I was falling into. I guess it does always start by just tasting. Like when you skip a rock on water. It just touches the water for a while, just skims the water. But it falls in eventually.

“Bru, are you listening?” asked Luke. I nodded my head, running my fingers through my hair.

“Bru, he’s so wasted right now,” said Tony.

# Sithethile Sgwentu

Everyone chuckled. We were all on the soccer field. We were not really playing soccer. We were just taking shots, and Tony was the goalie. Luke kicked the ball hard into Tony's chest.

"Ow! You asshole," cried Tony, his freckles disappearing from his flushed face. The field erupted with laughter, and there were only five of us.

"East, did you have a little drink last night?" asked Luke. I was going to answer, but I just ended up throwing up instead.

"Do you want something to eat, James?" asked my mom. I shook my head and went upstairs. I passed out on my bed, and when I woke up, it was around 5:00 I think. Mom would be out for yoga; where were Dan and Nick (my brothers)? Maybe that's why I act out – I could have middle child syndrome, but somehow I highly doubt that. My brother started acting out first; he's twenty-one now. He still lives at home, but he's usually out, so I didn't really wonder where he was. But poor Dan was only ten, so he shouldn't be home alone. I went on my phone and scrolled through my contacts. I called Dan, and he picked up.

"Hey, where are you?" I asked.

"Nick and Luke picked me up to go get some food. We'll be back in an hour," he said, then he dropped abruptly. Kids sometimes...

So I was slowly recovering from some form of what appeared to be a hangover and sat up on my bed. I remembered that we were supposed to watch a movie for Drama today. Our Drama teacher wanted us to do a film study for this unit. So I needed to know about the film. You see, I was good at school, but cool enough not to show it in front of other people. You kind of just knew I was good at school, but I never said it. You never say if you're good at school if you want to be part of our group. Luke was the leader, if we even had a leader. I was also basically the leader.

Anyways, I decided to call Lulu. Now that I think about it, I don't know why I even called her. I was just thinking about her a lot. I don't know why, but she seemed like she was a real person. I don't know how to explain it. So I called her to ask about the film we were supposed to start that day. It rang a few times, then she picked up.

"Hey," I said.

"Hi, Easton. What do you want?" she asked. She was crying.

"You're terrible at small talk, you know," I said.

"Ok, Easton. What do you want, huh?"

"Ok, jeez. I just wanted to know about the film we watched for Drama today. I was sick, remember?" I said.

"Yeah, you were something alright. We watched Titanic. It's pretty long though, so we only got through the first 40 minutes or so."

"Ok, do you have notes, Lulu?"

"Yeah, I have notes."

"Can I come see you at your house? To get the notes," I asked. I regretted that immediately after I said it.

"Yeah, I guess you could come today. I'll wait just outside Llandudno. That's where I live," she said.





The Uber took me to the sign that said “Llandudno” just outside of Green Bay. I said thanks and closed the door. Sure enough Lulu was waiting by the sign. She was wearing faded out blue jeans and a yellow cable knit sweater. The sleeves went past her hands. As I walked closer to her, I realized two things: nobody knew where I was, and I was still wearing my school uniform.

“Hey,” she said. Her eyes were a little puffy.

When we got to her house, I realized how big it was. It was like a mansion, but she didn’t take me in through the front. Instead, we walked around through the back, and we went inside this small cottage. It was nice and clean with blue window frames and a matching blue desk. On the desk, there were notes spread across. We sat down by the desk, and I got out my notebook.

“Ok, here are my notes. You can write them down,” she said.

“Oh, can you write them in my book? My handwriting is terrible,” I said.

She nodded her head and started writing my notes for me.

“What are you humming?” I asked. Lulu was about halfway through writing my notes for me, and she wouldn’t stop humming the same tune.

“A song,” she replied.

“No shit,” I said, slightly irritated. More silence seemed to fill the room until she got up to get some water from the tiny kitchen.

“Do you want some water?” she asked.

“No,” I said it rather bluntly. I looked at the notes she was writing for me. They were too fucking neat.

“Shit, the teacher’s gonna know I didn’t write these,” I complained.

“Ok, so why don’t you just take a picture on your fancy little phone and go home?” she asked.

“No, no, just keep writing,” I said.

She did so, rolling her eyes the whole time. Once she was done, she kind of shoved it in my hand.

“Thanks. I’ll call an Uber,” I said.

She nodded her head and went back to her water. I realized the time was 7:37. I was probably supposed to be home.

“Do you wanna take a walk?” I asked. She looked at me like I was speaking German.

“No, Easton.”

So we walked all the way to the sign again that read “Welcome to Llandudno”. She waited with me for my Uber. It was pretty dark now and a rather awkward situation to just be standing by the highway with her. I looked behind me at the view of Llandudno, hills with houses scattered all over and a beautiful beach at the end. The water was so dark, with reflections of the house lights dancing all over it. I wondered why I was there with Lulu. Maybe I felt bad for her. Was she really having a panic attack or did she try to kill herself? When you think about shit like that, it makes you feel pretty sad.

# Sithethile Sgwentu

“Thanks for the uh note thingies,” I said. Why did I say thingies?

“Ja ok,” she said.

The car came and I jumped in without saying goodbye.

“Here,” said my older brother, slyly handing me a packet of cigarettes behind his back. He was using his other hand to give Dan a slice of pizza. I grabbed the packet of cigarettes quickly and gave him R40. Then I went upstairs with Luke, who was watching what we were doing. We basically ate the whole pizza in two minutes. I eat like a horse sometimes.

“Why don’t you just vape? Cigarettes are so bad, bru,” said Luke.

He knew they were both just as bad. But vaping was cooler, so everyone vaped. I mean, not everyone. Obviously, goodie goodies like Lulu didn’t. I ignored Luke’s comment.

“So the groups have been picked at random using the class list. Remember to share the work equally. The details are on SchoolSavy,” said Mrs Ankola.

She read the list and sure enough, I was with Lulu and her stupid friend Mia. Ok, they were both very smart actually, but you know what I mean.

“RIP East,” Luke shouted. Almost everybody laughed, including me. I had to. Sometimes you just have to do things. So I sat down at a desk next to Mia and Lulu. They didn’t seem too happy that I had to sit next to them because I once accused Mia of eating dog, because she’s Asian. I didn’t make the joke actually. Luke did, but I had to laugh along, even if I thought it wasn’t funny. We all opened our laptops and went on SchoolSavy under Drama.

The task was a summative assessment. We had to watch a film together and make a detailed film study poster. She taught us how to study a film after we watched *Titanic*. I liked that movie, please don’t tell my friends though. There was a list of more movies for us to watch, and we had to pick one.

Mia read out the list to Lulu and I: “Ok, so there’s *Good Will Hunting*, *Forrest Gump*, *Hotel Rwanda*, *Stand By Me*, *Of Mice And Men*, *Dead Poets Society*, *Schindler’s List*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*.”

So because I’m in a group with a bunch of girls, they picked *Romeo and Juliet*. Lulu opened her laptop. An expensive Mac Air, like everybody else’s. I wondered how she got it. She wasn’t exactly rich like everybody else in our school. I mean, she was part of CFUI, which was a sort of charity that got you in our school, and our school would have these fundraiser events that all parents loved to go to because it would satisfy their white guilt or something. I’m not saying that most black people are poor. I’m just saying that most kids who did CFUI were black, that’s all.

“Where did you get that laptop?” I asked.

“From the store genius. Where else?” said Mia, quickly responding for Lulu.

Her friends seemed to do a lot of the talking for her.

“Um, so, are we gonna watch the old version or the nineties’ version?” asked Lulu, changing the subject.

“The old one would be more authentic, I guess,” said Mia. Lulu nodded her head.





After Drama, it was the end of the day, so Luke, Tony, Tom, Sam, Jules, Stephie and I were just fooling around on the tennis court before we had to go home. It was Friday, so we were having Luke's big sleepover at his Llandudno house. Luke was super-rich, just like me. His Llandudno house had a whole separate one-story place attached to it which would be where everybody would be sleeping.

Anyways, Luke pulled me to the side while everybody else was talking. He was holding Stephie close to him. They were dating, and always holding hands, kissing and shit. So they were kissing right in front of me now.

"Did you two just bring me to the back of the court to make out in front of me?" I asked.

"No man," said Stephie.

She had a raspy voice and black hair with striking blue eyes. Very pretty, we used to go out, but Luke doesn't know. He didn't need to know, anyways.

"You know Jules likes you, right," Luke said.

I knew that I liked her too, I guess. Everyone wants us to date or whatever.

"Ja," I said.

"Well you should make a move at the party ok," said Luke. Then he walked away before I could say anything else.

So Luke's party was fun. Not much to document, except that Jules and I are kind of a thing now. Like we kissed at the party and stuff. Jules is really beautiful. She has soft wispy hair that falls around her shoulders and freckles dotted across her cheeks and green eyes. Plus, she was from Brazil, so she had a really pretty accent. I had myself the perfect girlfriend.

I guess I should write a little more about how we started "dating" but there's just not much to say. I asked her why she liked me because I don't really talk much, so it's not like she knew a lot about me. She said that I was cute and sweet. She also said that she liked that I was quiet because it meant that she could do all the talking. I don't really know how to feel about the last one.

I'm just glad that Luke interrupted us at that moment for dinner because I didn't know how to reply if she asked me the same question. Just imagine she said, "So East, why do you like me?" and then I just said, "Uh, I don't know." That would have been so awkward. I mean, she's really pretty, and she's funny, I think. Her hair also smells nice. But you can't just say things like that because that's weird. So you just don't say anything at all.

So we were all sitting on the bench together. I had my arm around Jules and whatever when Mia and Lulu walked over. Lulu looked different but the same. Her hair was in loose braids and she was wearing her socks just under her knees. Not a lot of girls wore it like that. She looked really nice. Anyways Mia told me that we needed to set up a time to meet and watch the movie together. The one for Drama class.

"Oh, it's the lesbos," said Luke.

They weren't lesbian. Luke just said that for no reason. Everybody started laughing. Damn, if only you saw Lulu's eyes. She looked so sad, or more than usual.

"Easton, just look at your messages," said Mia, ignoring Luke's comment.

They walked away.

"Just search 'uptight Asian lesbo' on your phone, and you'll find her text," said Luke.

# Sithethile Sgwentu

Jules laughed. I did too; I had to.

So that weekend, I had to meet Mia at her house, she sent me the directions and everything. I was thinking of walking there so that I could be a little late. She lived in this big estate pretty close to Llandudno. So we were supposed to meet at 9:00, but I was going to come at 10:00 or so. Anyways, I told my mom, who was putting on her fake smile, the one that she always did when Dad came back home. She offered to drop me, but I said no. I needed to clear my head, plus it was going to be Jules' birthday party soon, on the 20th of November. I didn't know what to get her, maybe a necklace or something.

I was walking to Mia's house and I was feeling odd. It felt like there was a big apple lodged in my throat. I don't know why I feel like that sometimes. I mean, on Thursday, I said something rude to Lulu, but I had to. We said a few jokes; they were "racist", I guess. It was towards Lulu, Mia and her friend Chloe. It doesn't matter anyway. I won't write that part down.

Mia's house was large, with a neatly mowed lawn and two Mercedes parked by the driveway. I knocked on the big oakwood door and Mia opened it. The smell of coffee escaped from her house. I said hi, she didn't say hi back. Instead, she just walked me into her house and up the stairs. Then she closed the door; her room was massive! Perfectly carpeted with a big balcony and a large TV. There were two beds in her room and Lulu was stretched across one of them, reading something. She was wearing chequered green pants and a black camisole, so she was in her PJs, which means she slept over.

Mia finally broke the silence. "You're late," she said.

So we were watching the movie, they were sitting on their beds, and I was sitting on the chair, not really wanting to be there, but I had to. So once we finished the movie, Lulu showed us the notes she took. That's what she was in charge of because she had nice handwriting. Then Mia left the room to go photocopy the notes, so we could all have it in our Drama books. Lulu and I were left alone in Mia's room for a while.

"You slept over," I asked. She nodded her head, not really looking at me but focusing on her phone. Which was some cheap Android, might I add.

"Did you like the movie?" I asked.

I didn't even know why I was talking; it's not like I could talk to her at school. She didn't answer and that pissed me off.

"You know I don't need to be nice to you," I said.

She sighed, "I just can't figure you out, I really just can't. You're nice but then you're a total... a total douche. I just don't get it," she said.

I was surprised because she was quite loud.

"Whatever, legit nobody cares about your opinion. You barely exist. It's sad, pretty damn sad," I said.

She didn't say anything, but a tear streamed down her face. I was starting to feel slightly uncomfortable, so I was glad when Mia walked in.

I got up when I couldn't take the screaming anymore. Dad had come back home. He owned a company called Softdrinks, so naturally, he was always busy. But he also didn't come home a lot. He kind of just stayed at hotels and stuff. When he came back home, he was always drunk or hungover. I don't really want to get into it that much. So it was really late and they were shouting. I rolled out of bed to check on Dan, and he was in his room crying. Fuck, I hate it when people cry. So I kind of grabbed him by the arm to take him to see what was going on. Our family wasn't very affectionate, you see. I found Mom and Dad in the kitchen.





“YOU DON’T COME HOME FOR TWO WEEKS, PETER!” Mom screamed. She seemed really pissed.

Dad looked really wasted, I mean he was kind of tripping over shit you know. Anyways, Dan was still crying and shit, so I had to pick him up and kind of cradle him like a fucking baby.

“Mom please calm down,” I asked.

Dad took the plates from the kitchen counter and threw them all on the ground. Then he started to giggle. Mom was screaming at him now; it was super tense.

“Mom, please chill,” I calmly asked.

She was just screaming now, no words, just noise. Then she threw a plate at me. Naturally, she missed and it crashed on the floor next to me. To be honest, I snapped. Dad was still laughing, Dan was crying, and Mom was still screaming. So I kind of shoved Dan into Mom’s arms.

“HERE’S YOU FUCKING SON, BOTH OF YOU NEED TO GROW THE FUCK UP! I CAN’T DEAL WITH THIS SHIT ANYMORE,” I screamed. Then I ran for it. I wasn’t so sure where I was going. But I wasn’t gonna come back home.

So I walked all the way to the beach. I sat down on a bench and watched the waves come close and go back. Nobody was there except me and some strange looking hobo sleeping on another bench. So I lit a cigarette from the untouched packet my brother had given to me. I liked smoking cigarettes because it made me seem cool. Sounds kinda stupid, I guess, but that’s the truth of it. Anyways, I was thinking about Jules. I just didn’t know what to get her. You know, in my opinion, I think girls are pretty dumb. Like, they have too much emotion, you know. They’re too worried about being pretty and shit, and they want guys to be good boyfriends, like most of us give two shits. I don’t know, that’s just my opinion. I decided I’d get her a necklace. I didn’t know where I would get it though, so I started to lie horizontally on the bench. Trying to sleep and all, but I couldn’t. It was freezing. The cold air just kept on biting at my skin. So I was just staring at the deep blue water. Wondering what lurked beneath.

“Umm, Easton. Are you ok?” asked a soft voice. I felt a finger gently poke my cheek. I quickly wiped the sticky drool off my face and sat up. Lulu was staring at me with those big hazel eyes.

“Were you sleeping here?” she asked.

Poor thing, she was honestly concerned for other people, like anybody in this world gave a shit about others.

“Ja, I was, and I still would be if you didn’t wake me,” I said.

She rolled her eyes and started to walk away.

“Wait. What are you gonna do today?” I asked. To be honest, I was really bored even though I had just woken up. I didn’t want to go back home. She shrugged.

“I don’t know,” she replied.

I was silent for a while.

“Do you want to take a walk?” I asked.

She shrugged again. So I stood up and we walked along the shore. She was very quiet. I think she was remembering what a douche I had been to her the last time we spoke.

# Sithethile Sgwentu

“Um, what I said. Was totally not um cool, I guess. So I’m sorry, I guess,” I said.

Silence.

“Well, I forgive you. I guess,” she said eventually.

I chuckled. The soft sand of my feet made me remember how much I hated the beach. I only hated it because of my fucking parents. When Dad “taught” me how to swim, he was super irritated with a mix of drunk. Not to mention my Dad can be absolutely batshit crazy sometimes. That’s the only way to describe it. So he kind of dragged me into the water even though I really didn’t want to swim. I was choking on the saltwater and kicking and he was just shouting at me. He was shouting really loud. I hate shouting. I really hate shouting. I needed to get off this fucking beach.

“Do you want to run away?” I asked Lulu.

She looked confused.

“I mean, just for a day, we could walk somewhere really far,” I suggested.

I felt around my soccer shorts for my wallet. I had a credit card in it and R20 cash. Now I knew I had enough money because my credit card got R500 in it every month, thanks to my Mom. So I had about R1 050, I think.

“Where would we go then,” said Lulu, as though she was humouring the idea of a little kid.

“Just follow me ok,” I said.

She smiled and walked behind me. When we got off the beach onto the road, I realized that I didn’t have my phone with me, which meant I couldn’t get an Uber.

“How do we get out of here?” I asked Lulu.

“I guess we’ll take a *phela*,” said Lulu. I had no idea what that was.

She grabbed me by the wrist to lead me to the front part of Checkers. It was covered by trees, and there were so many cars there. Everything was happening so fast. Different people were getting into the cars, all shouting in Xhosa or something. I felt like a little child confused at the mall. Lulu with her hand still clutching mine led me to a white car. About four people were getting into the car at once and one guy was standing in front of it. She started talking to him in Zulu or Xhosa or some other African language. He let us in. We had to sit in the back seat, though. It was a pretty shitty car. I was being squished next to a fat lady. The car started moving around Hout Bay. It was so bumpy. I was amazed that the car could move at all. Lulu took ten rand from me.

“Uh uh, twenty,” said the taxi driver, at least that’s all I heard. Then Lulu started to argue with him in the African language. Meanwhile, the three people at the front were playing on their phones with each other. The fat lady offered me some gum. I took it; it was chappies gum, the flavour vanished in a few seconds. Then the fat lady said something in the African language and fanned herself with her hand. People laughed at her.

Finally, Lulu was done arguing with the taxi driver and handed the lady in front of us ten rand. The lady in front of us handed it to the taxi driver. Lulu didn’t know that lady. Why did she trust her? Why didn’t she wonder if that lady would take the ten rand for herself? Pretty dumb, I thought.





The car went around Mandela Park for a while and dropped the other people off. It was so dirty. I know that makes me sound like a snob or whatever, but it really was filthy. Everybody was walking on the street, some people were staring at me, some were frying chicken feet or some other meat. But as soon as the taxi left Mandela Park, I felt sad. I wanted to see more. I instantly missed it, even if that sounds strange. Anyways, soon we were on the road along Llandudno. One side was the ocean, and the other was the mountains. It was just Lulu and me in the back of the car now.

In an Uber, it would have been silent, but in this car, the music was playing loud. Shity music too, in a shitty car with a shitty driver. The whole experience was shitty, but I kind of liked it. So the taxi driver beeped at some guy waving at him, and the guy got in the front seat and gave him some money. The guy was sloshed by the way, absolutely off his face with drunkenness. He was slurring something in the African language and then turned to look out. As he pointed at me, more slurs escaped his mouth. Lulu clearly thought this was funny because she started very silently laughing into my shoulder. She was probably trying not to laugh at his face and whatever. She was really laughing hard, like a little kid. I don't laugh like a little kid; my laugh is almost always fake. Fuck, that was depressing. I guess watching somebody laugh is depressing in like, a deeper sense or whatever.

We got out after the drunk man, all the way at Sea Point. The drunk man kind of shoved himself out of the moving car. He toppled over and crawled to the pavement. This caused Lulu to giggle even more. I tried to laugh too. I managed a stiff chuckle. Anyways, we got out at Sea Point, by all the stores and whatever. So we just started walking in silence. We both didn't really know where we were gonna go. Cars were driving by, people were smiling. The restaurants smelled like food. I was surprised how many people were out at seven or eight in the morning. The sky was a baby blue now, no clouds.

"Better than an Uber, don't you think?" asked Lulu.

She wasn't looking at me when we talked. She had the habit of doing that.

"Ja, it's definitely an experience," I said.

She chuckled. "I've been riding *phelas* all my life," she said.

"Pella, what does that mean?" I asked.

"Cockroach. It makes sense, they don't really drive, I guess. They crawl around the streets. No matter how many times they get damaged, they still manage to drive. I remember once a *phela* broke down, and the guy in front had to push it from behind to get it to have momentum again. I thought that was pretty cool."

It must have been about an hour of us walking together. She was walking on the pavement thing that blocked the ocean waves from coming on the road. I was worried she was going to fall in. We hadn't talked at all, but I was kind of just looking at her. God, that sounds stalkerish. She just seemed like she was thinking about something really hard. Her one eyebrow would raise and then go down. Or she would move her hands as if she was in a deep conversation with somebody. But then she went back to humming, the same tune she always hummed, at least that's what it sounded like. We were walking past all the restaurants and malls and stuff. I could see a McDonalds in the distance. My brother took me there once. Our car smelled like weed because he was smoking it. Mom got so angry, but Nick took the blame.

"Do you love Jules?" Lulu asked, stopping my train of thought.

I stared blankly. "We just started dating, like three weeks ago," I said.

She shook her head. "Sometimes you really disgust me, no offence."

# Sithethile Sgwentu

“Well, just because you’ve had intercourse with Jules and you’re only fifteen,” she said. What teenager says intercourse?

I laughed like I was supposed to. Jules and I hadn’t done anything, but I couldn’t tell her that. But I couldn’t lie either. So I would just say a whole lot of nothing.

“Who told you that?” I asked. She was silent for a while.

“Chloe told me. But she heard it from James A, who heard it from Tony or something. Tony heard it from you apparently,” she explained.

Tony was talking a bunch of shit.

“Wow, a lot of people are involved in Jules and my personal shit,” I said. I didn’t say anything further. I just left her to assume.

“Fifteen is too young, Easton. It’s also illegal,” she said.

“Well, just don’t listen to rumours from little gay shits,” I said. I was referring to James A.

James A and I used to be friends in preschool and whatever, but then he started to hang out with the nerdy computer kids, so now he’s gay. I don’t actually think he’s gay. He’s just weird, so he’s gay. You know, like how Lulu is weird and ugly, so she’s a lesbo. I mean, I think she’s kind of pretty and whatever. But nobody else does, so yeah. That’s just how things are. I’m not homophobic or anything.

“Easton, that’s homophobic,” she said.

I sighed. “I can be racist and sexist too. Which one would you prefer?”

I don’t know why I said that. It just sort of spilt out, I guess. She didn’t talk after that.

Churchhaven, I like that place. My parents own a house there. It’s super nice. There is a beach and not a lot of people. Sometimes I go there with Luke because he also owns a house there. We just sit on the beach and talk and fool around. The water is always so clear and quite warm. It’s the only beach I like. God, I missed that place. I wanted to go there. I needed to be there. “You wanna go to one of my houses?” I asked, not realizing how much of a rich kid I sounded like. She sighed, “Sure, anything goes today, I guess,” she said. We walked a little further. We had just passed McDonalds, and I realized that we were in need of a ride.

“So how do we get there?” I asked.

“Well, we could always go to the taxi rank,” she said.

The taxi rank was damp. Damp and smelly and cheap, it was shitty. But not shitty in a funny way, sort of a weird shitty vibe. Even Lulu looked uncomfortable, but in a less showy way, I guess. So these taxis or phelas or whatever were big and white with the South African flag colors on the side. There was some negotiation with the taxi driver, and then we got in the car. She gave him a scrambled up R50, which was in the lining of her bra. We sat at the back by a window. We were quite squished together and shit. She smelled like frying food. It was a nice smell, it kind of made me hungry. It reminded me of one of my favourite afternoons.

My favourite afternoon happened the day after the worst night of my life. I don’t remember it well. I was eleven. Dad was being mean the night before he slapped Nick across the face and threw a glass at my leg. At least he didn’t do anything to Dan.

Anyway, the next day I woke up on my Mom’s lap. Dad was making pancakes, bacon, ice cream and strawberries. Dan and Nick were already sitting by the table to eat. Mom was stroking my hair, and I had just realized the huge plaster that was covering my calf.





They pretended like nothing happened the night before. We just ate food and Mom and Dad told us a story about when they first met. I couldn't walk on my calf without it hurting, so Mom had carried me to the table. We all stuffed our faces and Mom and Dad were smiling. That day felt like it was shot in a movie with a honey-colored lens. That day was the last time I ever cried. It was the last time we all ate breakfast together. The last time I saw Dad kiss Mom on the cheek. The last time we all said "I love you" to each other. It was a sort of happiness no movie, book or song can capture. It felt like nothing could be so bad. I miss that day. I miss smiling without having to like, force it, I guess.

"Easton. Easton are you ok?" asked a voice. Mom? I was sleeping on her lap and my eyes were still closed. It was that honey-colored afternoon again. I smelled food, not pancakes. Something else. I opened my eyes slowly. I was still in the fucking taxi. I could see the back of the seat. I could smell food, but also perfume. So many people were talking but all amongst themselves. I was drooling again. But on someone's jeans. Must have been Lulu. Gross, I wanted to get up, but I couldn't. I just couldn't. I was so fucking tired that I couldn't do anything. I just drifted off to sleep.

I woke up when I felt fingers tapping on my head. I sat up and immediately felt embarrassed. She was holding two vetkoeks.

"The auntie gave me two. Take one," she said.

I don't know why she called that skinny lady sitting close to us auntie. They weren't related. I looked at the lady and said thank you. Then I took a bite. Damn, that was the best vetkoek I ever tasted. It had ham or something inside and it was so warm and salty. People were talking, all in the African language, music was also playing from the radio. I knew it was the radio because it said: "This is Radio 3000," or something like that. Then the taxi stopped somewhere in Millerton. It was also a township but with a lot of colored people. Luke puts on a colored accent sometimes and says, "Dames." I laugh when he does that.

Anyway, the taxi stopped and some colored people walked in. Some of them smelled like alcohol. I wondered what my Mom would do if she saw me with Lulu in the taxi. She would probably have a fit or something. Then I realized I had no idea what I was actually doing, it was strange. I had absolutely no control over what was going to happen next.

It had been about an hour in that taxi when we stopped in a place called Yzerfontein. It was quite nice looking with the pretty water and the sand and all the people smiling and shit. I looked over at Lulu, she wasn't sleeping, but she was kind of just zoning out, I guess. She looked over at me and whispered in my ear, "Easton, we need to get off here. I don't have any more money, so we're gonna need to run off," she explained.

Then she stood up and walked all the way to the driver's seat. There weren't many people in the car now, just five or eight. So we walked all the way to the driver's seat, and Lulu must have told the driver that we would be getting off at the next stop or something. The next stop was only like, a kilometer away. So once he stopped, almost everybody got out. Then he looked at Lulu and opened his hand as if she was supposed to give him something, most likely money. That's when she grabbed my hand and ran for it.

I've never ran so fast in my life, and because of all the cigarettes and shit, I was breathing pretty heavy. It's a good thing that it was just a straight road because I think I would have passed out if we had to run uphill. The taxi driver was behind us, shouting in the African language and shit. Lulu ran off the road behind a huge dune of sand that had green hair, ok it was probably grass, but it really looked like hair. So we crouched behind the dune, and I heard the taxi guy drive away.

We took a moment to catch our breath, and I could hear the sound of the waves crashing against something, then people laughing. My breathing was finally stable. I looked over at Lulu, who had a grin spread across her face. I lit a cigarette and offered it to her. She shook her head.

# Sithethile Sgwentu

“My mother’s going to klap me,” she said with a knowing smile on her face.

I laughed. “I can’t go back home. I just can’t,” I said.

I awkwardly held her hand. Not like how I hold Jules’ hand. Like how you hold a friend’s hand, I guess, but I don’t know how to hold a friend’s hand. It’s not like Luke and I hold hands ever, shit I don’t even hold my Mom’s hand. But I just sort of held her hand, without it being romantic or awkward or with any meaning behind it. I guess very few things really have any meaning behind it. Or maybe everything has meaning behind it. I don’t know; I’ll find out one day.

When we decided the coast was clear, Lulu and I continued to walk down the road. It was such a long road. Like, really fucking long. It felt like this town was just a random place in the middle of nowhere. We needed a lift to Churchhaven but there were no taxis. Lulu and I decided to hitchhike, the only problem was that we could get kidnapped or something. But anyways, we were walking down that long road. We were still holding hands, just sort of sleepily going nowhere. When I turned my head to look back, I saw a black Jeep from a distance. It was blasting music pretty loud. I held my thumbs up for a lift. Sure enough, they pulled over towards us. Two girls were in the car, probably in their early twenties. They were both pretty, Jules type of pretty. The one who was driving had long blonde hair and sunglasses. The other had red curly hair and freckles.

“Aweh,” I said, turning up my charm to one hundred. The red-head did the aweh sign.

The one with blonde hair nodded her head, “Where are you guys going?” she said. She had a mild Afrikaans accent.

“Around Langebaan, could you give us a lift?” I asked.

She smiled, “Ja, hop in.”

The windows were rolled all the way down, it was hot and sunny, and Juice WRLD was singing about doing cocaine. Running away wasn’t as bad as I thought.

“So are you two like boyfriend and girlfriend?” the driver girl asked.

“Ja sure,” I said, too lazy to explain.

“How old are you guys anyways?” she said.

Lulu had refrained from speaking; she just stared out the window.

“Old enough,” I snarkily replied.

The car soon started to fill up with useless small talk, what rapper we liked, our names, where we were going, how we were getting there, and so on. Yet I felt at home in that car with the strange girls.

I guess it seems a little douchey to say that I can figure people out. I can’t, but I can figure my sort of people out. I can tell which person has had money in their family for a while, or if they had just gotten money. I suppose I can break down my “group” or whatever. There are some categories I like to use. You don’t use them in public or tell them that you use them. Shit, don’t tell my friends that will make me seem weird or whatever. Anyways, you get the rich kid like the super-rich. You know what I mean, they’ve had money in their family for ages. Or the kid who just became rich, like their parents had to actually work for their money. Long lines of smoking and drinking, maybe it’s just my friends and family. Usually, the super-rich kids’ parents are super depressed.





The kids were raised by their maids or whatever. Shit, I was raised by my maid. I guess I never mentioned her. Mavis, that's her name. She's an old, slightly fat black lady. She has a very kind face, and she cooks for me all the time. I never greet her anymore. I don't know why. When I think about things like this, it makes me really sad, or happy, sort of somewhere in between.

Once I directed the two girls to the Churchhaven gates, they dropped us off. I told the two girls I would see them later, then I winked and did the aweh sign. I know it's cheesy, but that's just what you do. Lulu got out of the car and closed it shut behind her. The girls drove away. We turned around and looked at the gates. There was a fat colored security guard. The road was long behind the gate. You could see all the lavish greens on the one side and all the little houses on the other. Next to the houses, you could see the beach. The blue waters dazzled like diamonds. But all of that was so far away. A long walk away. God, that was the shit the English teacher wanted me to do. You know, descriptive writing. Apparently, I have "great potential". What bullshit.

"Howzit?" I said to the security guard. He kind of just stared at me.

"Can you open the gate then? I have a house here," I explained.

He raised an eyebrow and moved from his chair to get a clipboard. He scanned the clipboard.

"Name?" he asked.

"James Easton," I said. He scanned the clipboard again.

"K, Dames you can go in. Is this girl coming with you?" he asked.

He didn't look at Lulu though.

I nodded my head. Then he lifted the boom gate so that we could walk in.

After about twenty minutes of walking, my ankles started hurting. I could feel a terrible clamping feeling. It was so hot, I pushed my hair back and looked at Lulu. She was wearing loosish jeans and a grey hoodie. I don't know why I only noticed that now. I guess I'm not that observant. I took out a cigarette and lit it. Then I blew the smoke in Lulu's face.

"Your lungs are going to shrivel up very soon," she said.

I smiled. She always looked a little more pretty when she was irritated. Not that that was important or anything.

"Tell me a story," I asked.

She sighed then asked what type.

"I don't know, I'm bored," I said, between puffs.

She told me a story and she had such a soft voice as she told it, so I kept on having to ask her to repeat herself. So the story was basically about Early Years at school. She was remembering the time we used to play "kissy girls". It was a stupid game; you ran around after the girls and tried to kiss them. It's actually kind of creepy, I guess. But we were five, so it doesn't really matter.

After another thirty minutes of walking, we were finally at the house. There was no car in the driveway, which looked kinda strange. I was actually surprised that the security guard let us in. The house was medium-sized, I guess. It had a baby blue roof and white walls. Inside there was a room upstairs that clearly looked over the whole house.

## Sithethile Sgwentu

Down the hall, there was my parents' room on the left, and Dan's room to the right. The room that looked over the whole house was my room. The kitchen was the first thing you saw, to the right. To the left was the sitting room. And straight in front of us was the porch that looked right at the beach, or lagoon or whatever.

Lulu looked around the house, the way a child looks at Toys R Us because they know that nothing there is theirs. She sat down on the couch. It kind of made me feel uncomfortable that we were in that house alone. I sat next to her; I tried to sleep. She took off her sweater. I didn't notice that half of her chest was covered in freckles. Since it was a croptop, I realized that half of her stomach was covered in freckles too.

"Birthmarks," she explained when she realized I was staring. I walked to the fridge without talking and scanned it. There was plenty of shit in that fridge, some of it was eaten too, like somebody had been staying there, but the family hadn't been there since last December. I grabbed a can of beer from the fridge, I opened it and took a sip. I didn't really like beer, but I did like the "rewarding" feeling of drinking it. Not like I'm an alcoholic or anything.

So I walked down the hall to my parents' room, and the bed wasn't made. I looked around the room. I saw a jersey and some of Dad's clothes on the floor. I knew Dad came here sometimes, but I didn't know he sort of lived here, that shit's just messed up. I sort of chugged the beer then threw the can on the floor. I burped really loudly and wiped the remaining beer off my face. I heard footsteps and Lulu peered at me through the doorway. Then she opened it all the way.

"Easton?" she asked. I started breathing really fast, I felt like I was trapped in my own body, but like I was small, and my body was this room that I was stuck in. Like I couldn't function. I dropped to the floor and started screaming, I was screaming really loud.

I stopped screaming when Lulu started to snap her fingers in front of my face, the thing you do when somebody zones out.

"What are you doing?" she asked. It seemed that I was sitting cross-legged on the floor. I was so confused, I shook my face loose and stood up.

"Sorry about the screaming," I said.

Lulu picked up the beer can. "What screaming? You were just sitting there, just staring at the window," she said.

I was sure as hell that I was screaming.

"You know, you have a lot of stuff in the fridge. If you want I could cook something. I mean, I don't know how long you want to stay here. I don't really care," she said.

"Well, I'm starving, so yeah," I said.

She walked to the kitchen, humming that same fucking tune. I think I should try to stop swearing now.

So I sat down on the couch again and kind of just stared at the roof. It was white and clean. I wondered if my mom would report me missing. I wondered if it would go on the news as I thought about it some more. We would get a lift to a nearby town. I would draw the cash, and Lulu and I would hit the road. We could live by the beach and catch fish for the rest of our lives. We could make a water purifier. I remember when we made those in Year Six. That would be cool. I knew why I didn't want to go back home, but I had no idea why Lulu didn't want to go back home. I turned around and lay on my stomach so that I could see Lulu. She was actually quite pretty. Not that I care or anything; she was alright, is what I mean.

Anyways, she seemed to be very busy frying something.





"I've never seen this much expensive stuff in my life," she said.

She took out the salmon and cut it on a cutting board. The smell of frying onions filled the room. I don't know why I wrote that down. It's not important, I guess.

The pan made a hissing sound as Lulu put the salmon in the oil. I smiled at her reaction to the hot oil getting on her skin.

"Why are you running away?" I asked. She sighed, then poured water into a pot. I waited in anticipation as she added potatoes to the pot. I think she was crying. God, I hate crying. I nodded my head. I don't actually like talking much. Jules always says that it makes me quite boring. "We can't just kiss all day East," she'll say when I nod my head at her predictable questions. I got some open champagne from the fridge and poured what remained into two glasses.

"Have a sip," I insisted.

She shook her head and then she turned off both of the pots.

The sound fizzled away into silence.

"Eat, and I'll think about it," she said.

It must have been 1:00 in the afternoon. I have never eaten so fast in my life. I forgot that I hadn't really had a full meal in a while. I eat like a horse sometimes, I really do. Anyways, once we were done eating, she put the plates in the sink. Damn, I never put my plates in the sink. Anyways, once she was done, she just sat down and stared.

"Do you think anybody is looking for us?" she asked.

I sighed, "I hope not." Then I jumped up and went to sit next to her. It was getting really hot to be honest. I felt overheated. I asked her if she wanted to go to the beach, she agreed.

There were only old people at the beach, except for one couple that was like forty or something. I guess forty is pretty old, but I don't think there is a certain age when you get old. I think being old is just a mindset. Or something like that.

"What are you thinking about?" asked Lulu.

I shook my head.

We didn't go into the water, we just sat on the sand and stared. I remembered the last time Lulu was in the water, and she had some sort of panic attack or something.

"How the fuck do you have a controlled panic attack?" I asked.

She looked confused. "What are you talking about?"

"You. When you nearly drowned. It looked like you were drowning on purpose," I said.

She sighed, "Why do you care anyway? It really isn't your problem, Easton... Yoh, like just shut up for once."

I guess that's fair.

So we got back to the house. We were kind of just silent and Lulu passed out on the couch. So I got thirsty and went to pour myself a glass of water, but the tap wouldn't work. I kept on opening it wider, but it wouldn't work.

"Oh fuck," I said.

# Sithethile Sgwentu

It would be impossible for us to stay here for long if we didn't have water. The place was pretty old, so that was the only tap that had drinkable water. The rest was like, borehole or whatever.

"Why are you swearing?" asked Lulu, who was half sleeping.

"The taps are broken."

She slowly got up and looked at the tap. Then she started to loosen it and then tighten it. I'm not so sure why. It's not like she could fix it.

She fixed it.

"Do you ever get scared?" she asked.

"Of what?" I replied. I was a bit annoyed that she fixed it and I didn't.

"I don't know, getting older," she said.

Silence.

"What's to get scared of? I can legally drink and I can buy my own cigarettes."

She sighed. "Of course, I forgot that your life is practically handed to you."

"Shut the fuck up. I hate it when people say that. What does that even mean?"

"It means that you don't have to work hard at anything," she said calmly.

"That has its own problems," I admitted.

"Like what, Easton?" she said.

"I don't know. It gets pretty boring. It's like, no matter what I do, I don't get in trouble. So then you can just do anything and nothing happens."

"Easton, what could possibly be wrong with that?" she chuckled.

"Everything! I can do everything, what's right about that? But you wouldn't understand because saying stuff like that makes me sound like a douche."

"Well, maybe that's because you are one. Look East, maybe it's boring for both sides. I'm just saying you don't have to act like your friends. You could be better than that."

No, I couldn't.

Anyways that's pretty much all to report from my failed attempt to run away. My mom figured out where I was and picked me up at Churchhaven. Lulu was dropped off by Mandela Park. She didn't live there, but Mom never really bothered to ask.

"What is wrong with you James? Huh?" asked Mom.

I didn't reply. I looked out of the window. I watched the setting transition from poor township to rich and lavish estate. It made me hate myself for a few moments.

"JAMES!" Mom shouted.

"What?" I said.





She started talking about me and my life choices and whatever. Then she said something about how she knows it's hard, the usual bullcrap. I got out of the car and went straight to my room. I knew I had school the next day. I looked at my phone. I had about a thousand WhatsApp and Instagram notifications. I didn't care though.

"What is this?" asked Mom. She woke me up and shoved the cigarettes in my face. Must have fallen out of my pocket.

"Thanks," I said and took the pack from her.

She watched in horror as I used my lighter to light my cigarette. Then I blew some smoke in her face. I think she was about to cry. I smiled. She slapped me through the face so hard that the cigarette fell out of my mouth. She grabbed it and threw it out of the window.

"James, this needs to stop. I don't want you smoking in this house again," she said.

Then she walked out of the door.

"Fuck you," I said.

I don't know why I said that, but I knew there was nothing she could do. I walked downstairs and I saw Mavis (our maid). She was getting old. Anyways she made me a sandwich which I ate quickly. We didn't talk though. I don't like talking much anyways.

I caught up with Luke at school. I didn't tell him about Lulu though. Then I talked with Jules; she kissed me on the cheek. We all started planning the next time all of us would meet up. When the bell rang, we didn't go to class right away, we started mimicking TikTok dances and laughing our asses off instead. I was finally home.

"Are you ok, East?" asked Luke. I felt kind of bad for my mom, like I was a really bad son. I mean, I guess all teenagers are "rebellious" or whatever, but I felt like I was just another person reading from the script. Does that make sense? I guess I felt like what I said to her was the same shit that Luke, Tony, Sam or Tom would say to their Moms. It was like we were all the same person.

"East." We would all grow up to have the same lives, even if they were different, they would be the same.

"EAST." I guess I didn't really have a personality. I just said what I was supposed to say, and did what I was supposed to do.

"EASTON." Not that I always made the "right" choices, but it was what I was supposed to do, I guess.

"JAMES EASTON," Luke, Tony, Tom, Sam, Jules and Stephie shouted.

"Jesus, why are all of you shouting in my fucking face?" I asked.

"Bruh, we've been saying your name though," said Luke.

"Oh," I said.

"Babe, are you ok?" asked Jules.

I nodded my head.

Sam looked at his phone, "Oh shit, we missed history," he said.

Damn, Mr Kehnie was going to kill us.

# Sithethile Sgwentu

“How was school?” Mom asked. She had just picked me up from school.

“Fine,” I said.

“How’s Julie?” Mom asked.

How did she know about Jules?

“Her Mom told me. I didn’t know you had a girlfriend,” she said.

“Uh huh,” I said.

“Her Mom actually invited us over for dinner,” she said.

“Ok,” I said.

“Mom, do you want to take me to lunch now, we could go to a restaurant? If you want,” I asked.

“Oh, ok,” she said. She sounded very surprised.

I realized that Mom and I didn’t really ever have conversations longer than two minutes. She talked about school when she was younger and all the “shenanigans” (I think that word is pretty cringy) she and her friends got up to. I always find it interesting to watch people while they talk. Even though Mom was looking at me, it looked like she was looking far away. Mom was actually really pretty. She had long honey blonde hair that was always braided. She had grey eyes and a really pretty smile. I wondered if Dad said she was pretty. Then I remembered my art project. We were supposed to draw somebody, but very realistically. I thought that I’d draw Mom. Her school stories made her sound like Jules. I wondered if I’d marry Jules, then I’d probably become a cheating alcoholic too. I guess we all become like our parents, and if we try not to, we’re just more like them than ever.

After lunch, I went to Luke’s house and we did some skating and smoked some cigarettes. When I went home, I tried to do my homework, but my brain was kind of distracted. I managed to do the sketch of Mom though, I painted it and everything. It looked just like a picture. I didn’t show the painting to her though, that’s kind of gay. Anyways, I realised Dad wasn’t home. I forgot that he had to go to Joburg for a work thing. I couldn’t sleep that night. At around four in the morning, I went on my phone. I looked at Lulu’s WhatsApp; she was online. So I called her even though it was late, or early I guess.

“Easton, why are you calling me?” she asked. She sounded a bit sleepy.

“No reason, I just wanted to,” I said. I asked her if she got in trouble, and she said yes. Then she told me she was really tired. It was an awkward conversation, I guess. I don’t remember much, but I do remember saying, “Do you remember that stupid little prank we used to do when we were younger?”

“What?”

“You know, we would ask other people to spell out ‘I cup’. It spelt ‘I see you pee’, and we used to giggle about it for hours. You remember that, right?” I asked. I think I was feeling nostalgic. We just learnt about that word the other day.

“I remember that, actually. Lol, that was so random,” she said.

It was random, I guess. She started laughing the way she always did.

“Yoh, you’re so weird, Easton. Like, I thought you were a ‘cool’ guy and whatever, but you’re just weird,” she said between bursts of laughter.





“Well, your friend Chloe is weird too. Isn’t she a furry?” I asked.

Lulu laughed, “Yeah, she is.”

“Is she like, attracted to dogs or something?” I asked.

“Easton, you can’t say things like that; it’s mean,” she said. Her tone was serious.

“Oh,” I said. She started laughing.

“I’m just kidding. You sounded like you cared for once,” she said, but in a jokey way. I started laughing too.

“It’s lovely, Easton. Amazing attention to detail in the eyes. Ja, it’s lovely,” said Mr Black. It was the next day, and I was at art class. Mr Black (our art teacher) made everybody show him our progress on our “artworks.” I thought that after the compliment, he would let me go back to my seat, but instead he decided to show my “artwork” to the whole class.

“Is that your Mom, East?” asked Luke.

Everybody started laughing. God, when’s the last time I felt embarrassed?

“Luke, why the fuck are you staring at my Mom? Fucking creep, is that why you’re always coming to my house?” I said.

We were just playing around and all, but Mr Black thought it wasn’t too funny, and he sent me to our principal’s office.

I made sure it took a while to get there because I was feeling a little dorky after I put so much effort into my “artwork”, so I sort of hung around the older girls for a bit. I think they were doing drama because they were reading off a script. I grabbed a script from the cutest girl’s hand and started running and reciting the lines. She ran after me. “Oh my god, stop it,” she said. But we were just fooling around. So I must have been flirting with those girls for about five minutes when we all got bored of each other, so I decided to go to the principal’s office.

I was walking down the hallway to his office and whatever, but I ran into Lulu. She was just walking out of Miss Zilon’s office. She looked drained, I never really understood what looking drained meant, but now I do. It sort of looked like somebody had taken a tube and sucked all the air out of her. I know that sounds dramatic, but that’s just what it looked like. She didn’t even look at me; she just walked right past me. It almost felt like she was walking through me. Like in those movies with the ghosts.

“Tsk tsk tsk James,” said Mr Rudy (the principal). “James, this must be the third time you’ve been in my office this term,” he said.

I nodded my head.

He sighed. “You’re a good kid. You get good grades ok. I’m going to let you off for now,” he said.

Then I think I nodded my head, or maybe I mumbled sorry. I don’t know. All I remember is that when I got out of his office, the bell rang for break time. I didn’t go straight to Luke and them though. Instead, I tried to find Lulu because she just didn’t look like herself. Not that I care, it was just surprising, that’s all. So I kind of just looked around, I went pretty much everywhere, but I found her and her friends sitting behind the big wall behind the math teacher’s class. All that was behind that wall were two blue benches. It was extremely separate. Luke Sam and Tony were caught smoking a cigarette there once. So it was kind of a surprise to see Lulu, Mia and Chloe there. They were kind of just sitting there.

# Sithethile Sgwentu

They were kind of just sitting there. Chloe and Mia were sitting on opposite sides of the bench, and Lulu was kind of just stretched across the bench. Her head was on Mia's lap, and her feet were resting on Chloe's lap.

I guess I should be more descriptive when it comes to people's looks. Chloe had brown-blond hair that was always kinda poufy. She also wore dog ears on a headband. I don't even know how that's allowed. Anyways, Mia had black straight hair that was always tied in pigtails. I think I already said what Lulu looks like. It's not that important. I just thought I'd be a little more descriptive.

"Why are you just staring at us?" asked Lulu.

I didn't think they could see me.

"I uh, I was just... I wanted to sit here," I mumbled.

They kind of just looked at me and then Mia sighed. "Well we're sitting here," she said.

I didn't ask anything. I just sat on the bench opposite them.

They pretended like I wasn't there; it felt like the roles were being reversed. Without Luke, I couldn't think of an insult. I kind of just went on my phone and listened to them talk. I didn't want to leave anyways.

"Ok, the best male singer," said Lulu.

"Jon Bon Jovi," quickly replied Chloe.

Lulu and Mia groaned.

"No, it's one hundred per cent David Bowie," said Lulu.

"Gross, that guy just gives me the creeps," said Chloe.

Then Mia argued that it was Mozart.

"He doesn't even sing though," said Lulu.

"Oh whatever, he's so much better and classy than whoever you just said," she said.

Lulu and Chloe looked horrified. It was hilarious.

"Ok, since we can't decide who is the best, we can at least come to an agreement and say that Freddie Mercury is the second best," said Lulu.

Chloe and Mia nodded their heads.

"What do you think, Easton?" asked Lulu.

She sat up and looked at me.

Mia looked extremely surprised. Chloe sort of looked disgusted. I forgot that people like Lulu and them didn't really like me.

"That's just sad. How have you never listened to David Bowie? Jon Bon Jovi? Or Queen?" asked Lulu.

"I don't know, aren't those guys like, pretty old?" I asked.





Lulu, Chloe and Mia gave an audible sigh.

“You need to listen to better music than Juice WRLD,” said Chloe.

They all nodded their heads. I wonder what Luke would have said if he knew I was here, or Jules. So I left them and went back to my friends. When Luke asked where I went, I just told him I was at the principal’s office for a long time.

After an extra tiring school week, it was finally Friday. When I got home, I was immediately reminded that my Mom and I had to go to have dinner with Jules and her Mom. I really didn’t want to, if I can be honest with you. I didn’t really think I liked Jules. I don’t think I ever liked Jules. She’s a nice girl and whatever. I mean, she’s pretty, but that’s pretty much all I know about her and everybody knows that she’s pretty. Anyways, Mavis told me to go shower, so I showered and then I put on some clothes because I realized that I had been living in my school uniform for a while. I really needed to cut my hair. It was starting to curl at the ends. I didn’t even know my hair could do that. It kind of made me look like a stoned skater dude, not that I really care. It’s just that I hadn’t looked in the mirror for a while.

Jules’ house was huge. It was all wooden and kind of looked like a really big treehouse. I wondered what her Mom did for a living. Anyways, after I said hi to her Mom, I went up to Jules’ room while our Moms went to the living room.

“You look nice,” I said.

“That’s the first thing you’ve said to me in four days,” she said.

She seemed a little irritated, and to be honest I didn’t know what to do. She sat down on her bed, and I sort of awkwardly sat next to her and put my hand on her shoulder. This is why I think girls are stupid. If we weren’t “dating” would she even care? It’s not like we could talk about a lot of stuff anyways. I don’t even like talking.

”I’m sorry,” I said.

“It’s not about being sorry, East. You’re always sorry,” she replied.

That’s not true, I think this must be the first time I’ve ever even said sorry to her. She stood up and moved my hand away.

“Do you even like me?” she asked.

There was a pause.

“Of course I like you, Jules. We’ve been friends for ages,” I said.

“East, we’ve all been friends for ages. You don’t like Tony, but you guys have been friends for ages. I’m not trying to go after you; it’s just like sometimes you’re not even there,” she said.

I think she was about to cry. God, I really, really hate crying. Yet, people always seem to cry in front of me.

“Why do you even care anyways?” I said.

She looked shocked. “What the fuck East?”

“Blah blah blah, everyone’s always in my fucking ear all the time,” I said.

She laughed, the way you do when you’re really pissed off with somebody, and you don’t know what to say.

# Sithethile Sgwentu

“So that’s why you never talk. Whatever comes out of your mouth is just bullshit,” she said.

“You’re the exact same, it’s just sadder because you talk all the time,” I replied.

So you can imagine how awkward dinner was. We didn’t really talk to each other after that. It’s not like our moms noticed; they were so busy with their own conversation. I guess everybody is busy with their own stuff all the time. The next day Lulu called me. She never calls so I was pretty surprised.

“Hey Easton. I was just wondering if you felt like driving. I mean, I guess it sounds stupid, but Mia’s older sister is in town, and she said we could invite anybody to go on a little drive,” she said.

“Hey, I’m sorry about my Mom dropping you off at Mandela Park and whatever.”

“No worries, I needed the exercise anyways.”

But I still felt bad.

She told me what time, and I told her I’d come over. I hope my friends never find out about this stuff.

“Where are you going, James?” asked Mom.

“Out, Mom.”

She never usually asked me where I was going, so I was pretty pissed off that she didn’t just let me leave.

“Out where, with who?” she asked.

“With friends, Mom. Out to like, the beach or something,” I said.

She said ok, but that I should text her. Why the hell did she care? It’s not like I was going out doing “bad” things. Damn, this was probably the one time that I was going to do something “normal.”

So I walked down to Lulu’s house, and we talked for a bit. Once again, she didn’t take me to the main house, she just took me into that really small cottage. I didn’t care though. I was just happy to be there.

“How was your Friday?” she asked. She was wearing jeans and a crop Rolling Stones t-shirt. She had a bandana on her head. She was washing some dishes while she was talking.

“Uh, Easton?” she said.

“Oh, uh my Friday was pretty bad, not gonna lie. I kinda think Jules and I may have broken up,” I said.

She sighed. “Well, I guess it’s not fun to focus on that stuff. Just try to have fun today.”

Mia’s older sister was not like what I imagined. She drove one of those old yellow Volkswagen vans. She was also listening to music pretty loud, but old school music. When Lulu and I got into her van, I realized that besides the driver’s seat, it didn’t have any seats. Instead, there were blankets and very thin camping mattresses laid on the ground. When I got into the car, I greeted her and everybody else with an aweh. Chloe was wearing a red dress and dog ears with a matching dog collar. Mia was wearing an LV sweater and tights. But both of them were wearing the same facial expression.





It had been about ten minutes in the car; there was absolute silence, besides the music and Mia shouting at her sister in like, Chinese or something. I don't know if she was angry or not. Chloe broke the silence by saying, "Why the hell is he here?"

"Guys, don't be mean. Plus you said I could invite a friend,"

"OH OK Lulu a friend! I mean, I know Chloe was being a bit irrational, but like two weeks ago, you hated him," Mia said.

This argument continued between them for about ten minutes. They almost acted like I wasn't even there. Lulu settled the situation after a while and they were back to talking about random stuff. I wasn't really talking, but that was ok. I was fine just being there.

So I think we were driving to Blouberg because that's what Mei (Mia's sister) said. I learnt some new things about all of them. Like how Lulu is obsessed with music and Mia loved everything to do with cooking and how Chloe actually knew a lot of things about animals, like a lot. So I told them about how much I like movies, and they were actually surprised.

"I actually really liked Titanic though," I said.

There was silence. Then Lulu burst out laughing, the way she always does.

"Titanic was so bad. The only thing good about that movie was young Leo," she said.

I was offended, don't tell my friends this, but I actually think it's my favourite movie. Chloe went on to call the movie cheesy and other stuff. But then the car went super silent. Until the next song started playing.

"Put it louder," said Lulu. They all started dancing. Lulu grabbed my hand and started sway-dancing. I didn't know what song it was. Then Lulu sang the opening line.

"I can't get no satisfaction," she sang, very off-key.

Mia pretended to do the drums, Chloe played the air guitar, and Lulu kept on singing off-key. Then they all screamed. "No no no. Bum bum bum bum bum... Hey hey hey! Bu bu da bu. That's what I say!"

I laughed really hard at her terrible singing. I don't think I've ever laughed so hard in my life. Mei blasted the music up and opened all the windows, and for a second while the song was playing, it almost felt like the music was slowing down. For a second, it went silent. I knew it wasn't silent at all, but that's just what it felt like. It felt like that honey-colored afternoon again. When the music ended, everybody was out of breath.

"That was some of the worst singing I've ever heard," I said, between breaths.

"Oh don't lie, you loved it," said Lulu.

So we got to Blouberg and went to this little ice cream place. We got ice cream and kind of just walked around the beach. We were all talking about movies or music or whatever. Anyways, I wasn't really talking. I don't like talking much, anyways. Lulu managed to break away from the conversation. Chloe and Mia were still going strong arguing about something.

"Why did you break up with Jules?" asked Lulu. She sounded serious.

"I didn't, not really, I guess. She legit just started complaining to my face, so I got a little annoyed and told her she was always complaining to my face and whatever."

"Did you at least call her to say sorry?"

# Sithethile Sgwentu

I shook my head.

“Bruh. You have to call her,” she said. “Call her and say you’re sorry and that you’re stupid.”

“Why do you care anyways?” I asked.

She paused. “Just because you’re not a likeable person, so I want to make sure you don’t end up sad and lonely,” she admitted.

I laughed.

“What are you two talking about?” asked Mia.

We told her it was nothing. Chloe stood behind her and looked at me like I had done something suspicious.

It was kind of warm that day, so there were quite a few people at the beach. So we all sat down and watched the windsurfers. I think the wind was too strong because one guy got pushed like fifty meters away. So we were talking about surfing, and Chloe was lecturing us on why we should save the turtles. I felt something really cold on my head, my first guess was bird shit, but it was heavier. Then Mia gasped, ice cream started to drip all over my face. Lulu and Chloe started to laugh. I looked up at them. They were the culprits. I started running after them into the water; it was pretty cold. Mia chased after me to slow me down. Chloe was pretty fast, so I couldn’t get her. I got Lulu though. I head-butted her in the stomach, so ice cream went all over her top.

After we had our little ice cream fight, all of our clothes got pretty dirty, so Mei made us wash the ice cream off in the water. We got super cold, so Mei made us all wrap around in blankets. Lulu said that the car made us look like “little hitchhiking hippies from the sixties”. We were all sitting in the car while Mei blasted her old music. We all fell asleep pretty soon because the music was getting really slow. I realized that I actually had an ok time. It made me wonder if I could do that every weekend.

I got home at around four and I said goodbye to everyone and whatever. Mom was waiting for me in the kitchen and asked me if I was hungry. I said no and went upstairs to think. I found a warm spot out on our balcony and lay there. I thought about being friends with Mia, Lulu and Chloe forever. You know, like friends in the movies. It’s not like I didn’t like my friends, I don’t know. I guess I was just being pretty dumb, but it was a nice thought.



I haven’t written in a while. I did something really really really really stupid. I did a bad thing, like a really bad thing. It wasn’t all my fault, it really wasn’t, but some people don’t understand things. They want things to be all complicated but really, they’re quite simple. That’s what makes everything so complicated. I didn’t really mean to say all those things that I said, but then I said them, and you can’t just vacuum up words that have already been said, so everything is just a bit messy right now.

So after that day at the beach with Lulu, Chloe and Mia, we sort of became friends. So what I would do is split break times, fifteen minutes with Lulu and fifteen minutes with Jules. I felt like two different people, like I didn’t know. Maybe I liked myself better when I was with Lulu and her friends. Does that make sense? Like I was actually two completely different people.

Anyways, I think Jules must have noticed I was spending time with them. I didn’t think she would care though. We made up. I mean I’m her “boyfriend” now. We both like each other, I guess. I’ve been a lot less honest to her, but this is a good thing because otherwise, I end up hurting her “feelings” or whatever. But things started to get a bit weird. I started to think about Lulu a lot, like all the time. My mind would say, “Oh Lulu would like this” or “Lulu loves this song” or “I can’t wait to tell Lulu about this” or “I think I’m in love with her.”





So Lulu and I were becoming really good friends. Like, she came to my house all the time and we had inside jokes and everything. Things were going really well; I was actually really happy. Then I would spend time with Jules, and even though it was kind of boring, it would be ok because I could think about Lulu. This was when the first confusing thing happened.

So Lulu and I were at my house. We had the whole house to ourselves because everybody was gone. We're sitting together, just talking about nothing. But that's when I realized that I was probably in love with her. So I decided that the next day I was going to go to Jules and break up with her.

When Lulu left, I told Luke about my plan.

He replied, "What the fuck are you talking about,"

"I just told you."

Silence.

"You've lost your fucking mind, you do realize that right?"

"Whatever Luke, that's what I'm going to do tomorrow, ok?"

So I went down to Jules' house and whatever. It seemed like she already knew I was coming though, because she opened the door before I knocked.

"East, I need to tell you something really important," she said.

We went up to her room, and she closed the door behind her. Honestly, I didn't really know what to expect.

"East, I know you've been hanging out with Lulu. No, don't say anything, it's ok. I just want you to know that she has some problems. Like she's actually obsessed with you. She tried to drown herself just so you could save her. I caught her staring at you in class one time. She also writes about you all the time in her stupid diary or whatever."

I was silent for a while. I guess it made sense at the time, or maybe it was just because I kind of wanted to believe it because it would make things easier. Anyways, that's sort of how it all started.

I stopped talking to Mia, Chloe and Lulu. I didn't even look at them and whenever any of them tried to talk to me, I would ignore them or say, "Yoh, just shut up." Soon they gave up on talking to me, I thought everything would go back to normal, but it didn't. I mean, we would make fun of them a lot more than usual. Luke even once called her an obsessive creep and it made her cry. I realized that I was still in love with her, even if I was "bullying" her. I kind of had to. Sometimes you just have to do things.

It's not like she was the only one suffering. I also hated it. I knew that she probably didn't do all of those creepy things but the truth is, I needed my friends, and Jules making up that rumour just proved that she cared. Does that make sense? I guess the truth is that I couldn't be friends with Lulu and them. They just wouldn't get me as much as my friends do, and they're weird. But I couldn't stop liking her as much as I did.

Maybe I liked it better when she was sad. I mean, after a week, she didn't care at all. She laughed with her friends and didn't even look at me. It was almost like she didn't care about me at all. I was starting to feel really shitty, I know I said I would stop swearing, but it's just so hard. I went home and immediately went upstairs. I shut the door and ran to the shower. Then I sort of just turned the shower on and sat in the shower. I was still wearing my school clothes and everything, but I needed to cool down. I sort of just sat there for a while.

## Sithethile Sgwentu

Everything was becoming so blurry. I usually don't think of myself as a dramatic person, but I guess what I was doing was pretty dramatic. I just felt lonely, I guess. Like I didn't have any friends. Like I was screaming and nobody could hear me. I wish I was a "nicer" person. I wish things didn't have to be so simple, but so complicated. I didn't have to believe Jules, but I had to. I had to. I had to. I had to. I had to. I had to. I had to. I had to. I had to. I had to.

I don't really remember what happened next. My mom says that she found me fully clothed in the shower yelling "I had to," like a crazy person. She said when she tried to get me out, I kicked her really hard. My Mom said that she didn't know what to do, so she called the school counsellor. They calmed me down or whatever. They made me sound like one of those kids with special needs or whatever, but I'm not one of those kids. I'm normal.

That's why I was sitting in Ms Zilon's (the counsellor) office. She asked me to sit down and so I did. It was a nice office and all, but I didn't need to be there.

"So, how are you feeling James?" she asked.

There was silence as she got her notepad out. It was like she was analysing me.

"Hungry," I replied.

She chuckled.

"So as you know, you had a nervous breakdown. Do you know what might have caused it?"

Silence.

"Aren't you the fucking, psychologist or whatever?" I asked.

She just stared for a second, then she acted calm. That pissed me off, so I got a cigarette out of my pocket and lit it.

I got suspended for a whole month. I didn't really care anymore. Everything was still the same, Jules sent me school work, and I still went out on the weekends. I wasn't "allowed" to, but I snuck out anyways. The usual teenage rebellion.

People always say that when you're feeling sad, you try to search for a distraction and that's a bad thing. But everybody does it, even if it's not drugs or whatever, we all have distractions. Maybe that's why people have kids. Maybe Lulu's distraction is school; that's why she's so good at class. Maybe Jules' distraction is looking good. That's why she cares about clothes and all that shit. Luke's distraction is his friends. That's why he tries to control everybody.

I also have a distraction, it's a bit weird, I guess. Sometimes when I'm feeling down, I go to the beach and sit on the bench. I kind of like the beach now. I have a love-hate relationship with the beach, if that makes sense. When I'm lucky, I'll see Lulu walking on the shore. I never go up to her. I just leave her there on the shore. I don't have anything to say to her. Not anymore. Maybe it seems pretty weird to just watch her, but I can't go up and talk to her. Sometimes you just can't do things.







# Senzelokuhle Nkabini

Senzelokuhle Mpumelelo Nkabini is from a small town called Estcourt, located in the midlands of the KwaZulu-Natal province in South Africa. He has a masters from the University of KwaZulu-Natal and his work focuses on rurality, gender, sexuality and culture.

Contact Senzelokuhle via [email](#) or find him on [Twitter](#).

## Alex and the Blesser

It's cold today in eMajokweni, a small village located in the outskirts of Durban. I can feel the frosty air piercing through my nose as I contemplate whether to leave this cosy bed or have my skinny body battered and numbed by this ruthless unsympathetic day.

I eventually gather up the courage and jolt out of bed to warm my bathwater and make something to eat. I placed the wood in the shed yesterday so that it wouldn't get wet from the melting frost and dampness caused by the fog. I eventually went to our worn-down hut, made a fire, and took a bath in front of the blazing flames. I also placed my half-full tub of Vaseline closer to the flames so that it slowly melts from the hard brick condition it was in. I left my clothes in my small zinc shack so that they wouldn't be engulfed by the smoke.

After ten minutes, I am already buttered up in Vaseline, slowly moving my R8.50 Sadie roll-on under my arms and getting dressed. As I exit my room, the sun is already shining its bright rays across the icy grass, but that offers little comfort because the cold air is still pricking my skin like a thousand sharp needles. Maybe it will get better once I am in the taxi.

After being crammed in a stuffy taxi for a whole hour, I finally get off at Smith Street in Durban. It's busy as usual and the place I am heading to I'm sure it's full. However, I will be able to enter because I am the doctor's "special person". I enter Dr Mbele's practice and Mbali, the receptionist, is sitting idle with nothing to do. I look across the patients' waiting area and it's empty; that's unusual. Where were all the Durbanites who are always seeking sick notes and extensions for their sick days? This was indeed odd. I greet Mbali. She responds with a fake smile. She definitely does not like me. I don't know why because I am always nice to her, but her boss adores me, so she has to toe the line.

"Is Dr Mbele available?" I ask Mbali with a big smile on my face. I know she hates that.

She responds with a cold "Yes!" while looking down, pretending to be reading something.

I head down the hallway to his consultation room. I suddenly stop. I need to spray some EMA on me; I can't just walk in there smelling musty. As soon as I enter the consultation room, the stench from the bleach and sterilisation chemicals abrasively penetrates my nostrils. The door is open, but I decide to knock anyway. A smooth dark brown face looks at me and a picture-perfect smile beams from this beautiful structure.

"How are you baby?" A question I have been waiting to be asked. I blush a little, then I take my eyes off the floor, and my big Bugs-Bunny teeth are revealed through my brown lips. I have a hard time looking at Sphe. I still can't believe we are even dating, me dating a whole doctor, definitely a fairy-tale in the making. I walk over to him, sit on his lap and give him a soft kiss on the lips. He looks directly into my eyes and leans forward to kiss me. At this moment, we are definitely in our own private Idaho.

After the kissing session, we converse about how his day was, even though it has not ended, but with the lack of patients coming in today, he hasn't had much to do. Of course, he doesn't ask how my day is going. I am currently unemployed, and the only way I was able to get here is the R800 that he had given me on the day we decided to consummate our relationship at Blue Waters Hotel.

Since it's a slow day, we decide to go have lunch at Circus-Circus near the beachfront. Mbali is instructed to lock up, while Sphe and I drive off to the beachside. We eat, chat and laugh. I have gotten used to ordering from restaurant menus, but I still struggle with the cutlery and how to pronounce the words.





In the midst of our conversation, Sphe gets a call on his cell phone. He responds with one-word answers and then ends the call. He looks at me and asks me how I feel about spending the night at his house. I don't know what to say. He pays for the meal and the drinks. I hear a stern yet soft "Let's go". I grab my phone and we head off to the parking area.

We drive up to a silver gate on La Lucia Avenue. It automatically opens once the car enters the driveway and three palm trees stand tall in the middle of the yard. There is a medium-sized house next to the car garages and a double-storey at the back. I am shocked at the beauty and elegance that I am looking at. I am surprised that Sphe has never brought me here. He lives alone for heaven sakes; I'm sure he gets bored being all alone in this big house.

While I'm still amazed by the beauty around me, Sphe parks the car in the garage and invites me inside the small house. White floor tiles, baby blue paint on the walls and dark brown furniture in the kitchen and lounge. I involuntarily give myself a house tour while the owner is getting himself something to drink. I walk into a bedroom that has an ironed cleaner's uniform laid on the bed and pumps neatly placed underneath the bed. I walk to the next room, and the bathroom has women's underwear dangling on the window, a pink facecloth on the shower rail, and lilac towels hanging over the bathtub. I leave the bathroom and head back to Sphe.

"When are we going to the big house?" I ask him as I sit down looking at the half-full glass of water on the table. He hesitates to answer and just focuses on watching television. He doesn't look comfortable.

I ask him another question. "Whose uniform is that in the bedroom?"

He looks at me, smiles and says, "It's going to be yours tonight."

I try to place my head on his chest, but he immediately gets startled. He stands up quickly and walks over to the curtain. A car stops right next to the window. He looks at me with a stunned expression all over his face, and whispers "Go and hide in the garage!"

I jolt to the kitchen and open the door that leads into the garage. I see Sphe's car and then another one that looks like a Jeep Wrangler. I first stand behind the door, hoping that if anyone opens it, they won't see me hiding on the other side. I quickly move away from the door and hide next to the car parked against the wall.

I hear voices coming from the car that suddenly parked near the window. It sounds like a woman instructing her kids to take groceries out from the boot. I hear footsteps entering the lounge and then in the kitchen. I am still baffled as to why I was asked to hide in the garage and who this woman and these children making a noise are.

I hear Sphe speaking to this woman; he's laughing and asking what this woman is looking for. She seems to be going through the house searching for something. The door in the kitchen leading to the garage opens.

I hear Sphe laughing and asking, "My love, what are you looking for?"

It seems the woman is now also in the garage, she opens the two garage doors, and the brightness of the sun shines through. I remain silent while listening to the woman's footsteps. She leaves the garage for a few minutes, and I get to change my position from squatting to lying on my stomach on the cold floor.

## Senzelokuhle Nkabini

When the woman returns, she is accompanied by another person wearing black pumps, similar to the ones I saw in the bedroom. Then, three short, burly looking figures appear next to the two human beings standing near the car garage. The woman has unchained the pit bulls. I urinate. The liquid involuntarily flowing down my thighs warms me for a few seconds, and then I become even colder than before. I see Sphe's shoes exiting the kitchen door, he calls out to the dogs, and a few seconds later they follow him. A sigh of relief.



I have been lying on my stomach on this freezing floor for three hours now, while Sphe is laughing and chatting with the people who interrupted us. The garage doors are still open, and the cold evening air is now lashing my body. I am hungry, thirsty and wet. I have accepted the fact that I might spend the whole night on this floor. I am even more worried about my grandmother. She must be worried sick by now, especially since I left my phone on the table. I guess I will have to buy another one if I leave this place alive.

While lost in my thoughts, I notice that the room is now quiet and the kitchen door opens. I see Sphe's shoes, then a whistle erupts. I get up and he signals for me to get into the car. I move slowly because my body is numb from lying on this cold floor. I get into the back seat and lie down. The warmth from the car offers some comfort. He reverses the car out of the garage and stops. Someone opens the front door on the passenger side and gets in.

"Hi, what's your name?" a cute face with big eyes gazes at me for an answer. He looks five or six.

"Alex... my name is Alex."

I look away and another question erupts from this small round face that's eagerly observing me. "Do you like popcorn Alex? We are going to buy popcorn". I ignore him.

His father saves me from this interrogation with just three words, "Stop bothering Alex".

The gate opens, the car exits, and I get driven back to Durban. Sphe buys something at KFC and withdraws some money from the ATM next to the restaurant. We stop at Bayside Hotel. I get handed the money and the KFC. I open the car door, get out, close it, and never look back. I enter the hotel and proceed to check in. After paying, I walk up to my room and proceed to unlock the door. The room is moderately clean; there must be a shortage of cleaners. Before I leave tomorrow I will have to ask the receptionist if there are any job openings at the hotel for male cleaners.





# Thenjiwe Nxumalo-Parsley

Thenjiwe Nxumalo-Parsley is a recent matriculant from Cedar House School in Kenilworth, Cape Town. In her time at Cedar House, she was an active member and student leader of the Diversity Discourse and Social Justice Committee. She is a talented creative who uses art, design, garment construction, and writing to highlight self-expression and a commitment to inclusivity in the creative field. She works as a DJ, a platform she uses to create empowering and safe spaces for black, indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC) femmes.

Find Thenjiwe's mixes on [SoundCloud](#).



## Bone Child

While the rest of the Grade 3B class sat in monotonous rows watching Mrs Lewis scrape down numbers and equations on the chalkboard, Thenjiwe was outside the campus waiting for her mother to pick her up. No, she was not bunking school. Instead, she had a rather crucial errand to attend to. Standing by the school gates, in her powder blue pinafore school dress, which she continually pulled down her hips because it did not fit right, she felt special. There is a sense of superiority that comes with being the only one exempt from school early.

“I have a severe allergy to fractions and multiplication,” she boasted to her deskmates when they queried why she was packing up in the middle of Mathematics.

This was possibly a slight fabrication, but the truth is that she did not know how to explain her situation to her peers. It was none of their business anyway. Nonetheless, the level of interest exhibited by her peers did enhance her feeling of specialness.

Swiftly, she strode out of the classroom and waited patiently by the gate next to the sand-bedded playground for her mother to arrive. She recalls the first day of term: during break, a prefect told her she was too big to be playing on the Grade 3 playground and referred her to the Grade 6 play area. How bizarre!

Luckily she did not have to remain reminiscing for too long because a dark blue Audi station wagon pulled up in front of the school gates. She climbed into the front seat, and her mother greeted her with a big smile, “You ready, my darling?” Thenjiwe nodded in response.

Before they reached the hospital, her mother applied a special plaster to her arm. An off-white square-like shape with the text *Emla Patch* wrapped around the front. She did not know what this did exactly, but her mother always assured her that it would make the injections less painful. With her patch on her upper arm, she felt that it made her look like a superhero she had seen on Cartoon Network – a television channel her mother had only recently allowed – a privilege that came with being nine years old, apparently.

They travelled up the vinyl staircase to a room with a slide-in label: *Radiography Room*. In the sovereign state of her imagination, she pictured a group of crazy scientists huddled together over a radiating green light, with sparks and lasers shooting out of their new invention. However, when her mother knocked on the door, it was not a crazy boffin with cinched hair who opened it. Instead, a woman in a pair of scrubs, similar in colour to her school uniform, warmly smiled at them. She looked familiar from the last time, but Thenjiwe was embarrassed to note that she had forgotten the woman’s name. In her defence, they had not visited this side of the hospital in a while. They were invited into the mystery doctor-lady’s office.

They were seated in two identical chairs facing the doctor’s desk. While her mother consulted the mystery lady and signed a green form, she sat investigating the pictures and posters on the walls. There were many diagrams of bones, which seemed standard, but she was shocked to see images of laser machines. Maybe this is a crazy science lab after all!

“Today’s scan will only be a short reading of the bone growth in her hands and then the usual shot. We will not need to do much because her growth rate is successfully declining. Your daughter should be on track with her agemates in a year.” The doctor received the form back from her mother.

“That is great to hear.” Thenjiwe’s mother looked down at her and smiled.





Although she could not fully grasp the gist of what was said, she could not help but feel that they were patronising her. Was there something wrong with her? Maybe she, like Spiderman, had been infected by a radioactive insect that gave her abnormal abilities. She had asked her mother about this before, after visits such as this one.

She recalls her mother's response, "You are just growing too fast, my baby. I want you to be a little girl for a while longer, that is why we are here."



## Sandile Ngubane

Sandile lives in Mayville, in a shanty township called Cato Crest in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. He writes short stories and poetry and intends to use his fertile imagination to pen novels and movie scripts in the near future. In his spare time he goes jogging, reads, and writes. He was featured in the 2019 short story anthology titled *Beyond The Pen*.

He obtained a higher certificate in Scriptwriting at Creative Arts College. He has an insatiable appetite for reading and writing and believes writing is his therapy and incantation. The artwork featured with this story is by 27-year-old artist Nkosi Chili, who is also from Mayville, Durban.



## Our Ride or Die

Five years into the new democracy, Cato Manor – affectionately known as Umkhumbane – still bore remnants of apartheid: a cluster of ramshackle shacks devoid of proper sanitation, running water and electricity. Some of the courageous inhabitants resorted to illegally connecting to the electric current from the streetlights. Too often, there were fatal consequences for that level of bravery.

Despite a lack of amenities, children always find ways to create a pastime. Like fluttering moths to a little flame, we were inevitably drawn to one object: a red chainless bicycle.

Often, a throng of us would take turns mounting the bicycle from the peak of the steep road and descend downwards. Most of the time, we were turning a deaf ear to our mothers' reminders to do house chores and run errands. Darkness was our worst enemy since it always curtailed our fun just when it had reached its climax. We would then reluctantly go to our respective homes where harsh questions or, for some, a spank awaited us. No one would wear shoes. To some, it was a matter of choice; to others, it was inevitable. Our feet were slowly adapting to stepping on stones, glass shards, and thorns without a yelp. But in our hearts, we knew there was one fatal thing our bodies would never adapt to: bare electric wires snaking under the scantily dug out ground.



One night, I came home dragging along my usual companion, the red bicycle. All along the journey, a fat moon had been hanging over my head, as if it was going to explode on top of me. About a year ago, my Mom had arrived with the bicycle from her domestic work in Westville. It was in decent shape, except that the chain was missing.

My Mom loved me dearly. She went out of her way to show me that I meant a lot to her. She had once told me a harrowing story about my brother. His name was Mbongeni and he passed away when I was still a toddler. According to her, he had been roughly around my age – and I was his spitting image.

On the eve of his passing, a Saturday afternoon, it was scorching hot. Mbongeni had entered the house and sidled along the wall. Mom said it was a tell-tale sign that he wanted to ask her for something.

“Can I go to swim in the river with my friends, Mom?” he had said, eyes staring down and slightly gnawing at his forefinger.

“Hell, no! You will drown in the river. Can’t you see that I’m a pauper? I barely have a funeral cover?” Mom had said, not mincing her words.”

“I won’t drown. I know how to swim, Mom,” Mbongeni had been on the verge of tears.

“Now you are starting to be a pain in the arse. Go! Make sure you come back before the sun goes down. Or else I will give you a spank.”

Swimming in the river was not the only thing that Mbongeni and his friends did. They also dipped sacks into the river to catch catfish. If swimming became boring, they resorted to surfing, using white polystyrene packaging as surfboards.

Mom had told me that the twinkle in Mbongeni’s eyes and the Cheshire cat smile on his face when she gave him permission to swim in the river left an indelible mark on her heart and will be forever ingrained in her mind.



When the sun began to kiss the mountains, painting them reddish-orange, two boys with puffy faces and bare chests had hurtled into the house and began to cry.

“He is dead! He was electrocuted by bare electric wires on the river bank!” one of the boys had blurted out.

“Who?” Mom had asked. Her heart was thumping, and she was gasping for air.

“Mbo... Mbongeni...”

Mom had wailed in agony. The neighbours were alarmed. In a fleeting instant, they had flocked into the house.



When Mom answered the knock, I was suddenly bathed with paraffin lamp light that issued from our wooden house. And when she laid her eyes on me, she was incensed at what she saw.

“You look like a pig that has been shovelling mud!”

I quailed and examined my clothes as if seeing them for the first time. Grease was all over my t-shirt like a bad rash.

“Have you bought enough soap to wash those clothes, Bongani?”

“No, Mom,” I muttered.

She stood ponderously on the doorway with fists rested on her hips, which gave me a momentary reprieve. After a scathing stare, she flounced off into the kitchen. I timidly dragged the bicycle along into the house and parked it underneath my squeaky bed.

She poured water in the kettle and laid it on the flame of a paraffin stove. In a short while, water was boiling. I sloshed it into an enamel dish and took it outside for a bath where I wouldn't have the inconvenience of mopping a wet floor.

After the warm bath, I changed into pyjamas. A warm, scrumptious meal of pap and chicken feet awaited me. Meanwhile, Mom was busy ironing my school clothes.

To say Mom had done a fantastic job on raising me as a single parent was an understatement. My father had a proclivity for booze and shuffling cards. As fate would have it, he later died of liver disease. He did temporary plumbing jobs, but would sometimes lose all his wages on card gambling. And the onus to put food on the table was on Mom.

When I had finished eating and was ready to sleep, she scolded me for my earlier porcine behaviour and pinched my ears for all the trouble. That night, my sleep was uncomfortable. My ears were throbbing with pain.



When I returned from school the next day, I was as disciplined as a marine corp. Earlier in the morning, Mom had drummed it into my ears that if I ever rode the bicycle again, she would beat me into a pulp and feed me to vultures.

My close pal, Ntokozo, showed up while I was busy hanging a school shirt on a makeshift clothesline, a rope tied from the eaves to a nearby guava tree.



# Sandile Ngubane

He made several attempts to convince me to return to our “ride or die” without success. After a while, three of our partners in crime materialised. Likewise, their attempts were in vain. Realising I would not budge, they left with their heads dropped. Ntokozo also had thrown in the towel. We watched cartoons on a blurry black and white television until Mom came home from work.



My self-imposed hiatus lasted a monotonous five days. On the sixth day, I was back in the thick of things, and my partners in crime were enamoured. Through my abstinence from the game, I had earned all sorts of monikers: “mama’s boy” and “sissy boy” were some that came to my attention.

Ntokozo and I sat on the pavement, waiting for our turn to ride the bicycle. We were eating vetkoeks and ice lollies and laughing our lungs out at Msizi and Sabelo’s argument taking place on the opposite pavement.

Out of the blue, Mandisa, a beautiful girl who was Ntokozo’s neighbour, materialised. She had caramel skin and sported neatly plaited hair. Her home was one of the select few built with painted corrugated iron and deemed to be classy.

Ntokozo nudged me with an elbow and, when he received my undivided attention, he pointed at her with an index finger, a smirk pervading his face. She was now at the tuck shop counter, a loaf of bread clutched in her hands. He knew all too well that I had a crush on Mandisa but lacked the bravery to tell her. At the age of eight, who could blame me for my cowardice?

When she took another path back home, I was the most relieved human being on the planet.



Xina plodded towards us, hands taut on the handlebars, pushing the bicycle up the steep road. I heard Msizi saying to Sabelo, “I’m going to tell Xina what you once said about her.” He had evidently come short off their tit-for-tat. It was a tell-tale moment.

Upon reaching the top of the road, she heaved a huge sigh of relief. Descending the road was our favourite part; returning back was an onerous task. One had to negotiate the steep road while pushing the chainless bike and dealing with aching shoulders and calf muscles for all the trouble.

“Sabelo said you look like a gorilla,” Msizi blurted out to Xina. Ntokozo and I chuckled. Her real name was Zanele, but she went by Xina because of her lithe and supple body. She could do all kinds of somersaults and was, apparently, a good fighter as well. She was named after a Chinese lady who starred in a movie series which was all the rage at the time.

“He said I look like what?” Xina asked impassively. To me, it felt threatening.

Supposedly, Sabelo thought Xina had sharp pointed ears and a skin that was as dark as soot. Whether that was equivalent to resembling a gorilla, it was only Sabelo who seemed to know.

“Is what he is saying true, Sabelo?” She was crouched such that her gaze was level with Sabelo’s who was still sitting on the pavement. Meanwhile, Msizi, the match to the pending inferno, looked enthused at the prospect of a fight.

Sabelo remained taciturn as if what was happening didn’t ruffle his feathers in the least. Ntokozo and I, huddled on the pavement, feared the worst.



“Can’t you hear that I’m talking to you?” she said tetchily. Xina pushed Sabelo’s forehead with her index finger, and his head tilted backwards. That was the straw that broke the camel’s back. Sabelo stood up abruptly, his neck muscles taut like a drawn bowstring. His breathing was heavy and rugged. We watched with keen interest, anticipating what was about to unfold.

“You want to fight?” Xina rolled her dress inside the elastic that lined her panties. She then pushed Sabelo with such force that he staggered but managed to regain his balance just in time. He came charging like an enraged bull, but she swooped on him before he could lay the first blow. Xina tripped him and, in an instant, was on top of him. By that time, a horde of charismatic children had swamped the fighting arena. We were chanting in unison, “Pero! Pero! Pero!”

Xina’s butt was parked on top of Sabelo’s chest. She used her knees to press his spread-eagled arms against the ground.

“Do you still want to fight?” She gave him a few slaps against his cheeks, which drew peals of laughter from the audience. When Sabelo shook his head, it was clear he wanted nothing to do with the fight anymore.



If ever we had a presentiment on how the following day was going to pan out, we wouldn’t have dared to mount our “ride or die”.

The day started in high spirits. The mood and the competitive edge of the game was on another level. The only noticeable absentee was Sabelo, which became a subject of jokes that he was scared of having round two with Xina. We also fooled Msizi into believing that Xina was lurking somewhere for an ambush. We could sense that he was starting to shake in his boots.

The day continued in that fashion, filled with banter and laughter. We flaunted our different riding styles, and I trumped all of them, followed closely by Ntokozo.

A light drizzle pinged against the road and our sweaty bodies. When I looked up at the sky, there were ominous signs. A dark blanket of clouds hung menacingly over us.

“Unfortunately, we’ve reached the end of the day, guys,” I said.

“But I was supposed to be the last one to ride,” Sabelo said pleadingly.

“You’ll be the one who’s going to ride first tomorrow. It is raining now,” I tried to reason with him. He looked morose. Whether that was a ruse to break my defences, I didn’t know.

“Please be quick. I don’t want heavy rain to arrive while I’m still here,” I said to Sabelo after a pause. I handed the bicycle over to him, oblivious to the fact that I would live to regret that decision for the rest of my life.



A thunderclap erupted and a bolt of lightning crisscrossed the sky. A knot of fear coiled in the pit of my stomach. All of a sudden, half of the houses in our area were pitch dark.

“Where is Sabelo?” I asked in alarm. The three of us exchanged worried looks. I trotted downwards, my two partners in crime tailed behind me.

As I approached, I was confronted by the deserted bicycle, which sent shivers down my spine. I stopped in my tracks, my eyes scouring the area.



“Where’s Sabelo?” Xina breathed down my neck. I shrugged. When a bolt of lightning flashed again, I thought I had glimpsed something in the bushes. I went to the thicket that flanked the road and scanned the area. I was shocked at what I saw. I emitted an earth-shattering wail. Xina and Ntokozo came rushing to me. They also couldn’t hold back their tears.

Sabelo’s body lay grotesquely amidst the thicket. My first guess was that he had been hit by lightning, but when I saw bare electric wires, it dawned on me that he fell off the bike and was electrocuted. He was neither the first nor the last child to experience that cruel death.



Two decades passed swiftly, as if one was immersed in a dream, only to find that, when it had worn off, such a long time had elapsed.

There is a lot of transformation in Cato Manor, including improved infrastructure, but also escalating levels of crime. The number of shacks and illegal electricity connections has skyrocketed.

I, Bongani Gumede, have also experienced much change in my life. I have a Bachelor of Science in Medicine from my alma mater, Nelson Mandela School of Medicine at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. I decided to open my own surgery two years ago, and it has been rendering services to my community ever since. With the help of my childhood friends, Xina and Ntokozo, I have formed a bike riding club in our area. We teach children from the age of eight up to nineteen to ride bicycles. A sixteen-year-old girl in our club is a 20km champion. And a nineteen-year-old boy was a runner-up in a 42km competition that was held in Cape Town.

I am also happily married to my lovely childhood sweetheart, Mandisa Khumalo, an optometrist practising in the same surgery with me. We are blessed with a three-year-old baby girl, Amahle. She is both our blessing and bundle of joy.

The sport of bike riding seems to be running through my veins because I’ve joined a riding club and I partake in competitions whenever I get time.

Right now, I’m weaving through traffic on our residential road. It seems one of the forever troublesome sewerage drains has spilt over the road, causing monumental congestion. As I pass by a supermarket, I see one of the elderly women who is known as a gossip in our area. She waves a hand. I obediently wave back. I pedal for another block under the baking sun. When I reach a garage, I park my bicycle and ask a petrol attendant to look after it. I give him a twenty rand tip and I head inside the store. I fish out one of my favourite cool drinks from the fridge and trudge to the till queue.

As I emerge from the shop, I bump into one of my former classmates who is infamously known for housebreaking and pickpocketing. He has a slew of gash marks on his face and head. Word doing the rounds was that he was recently out of prison. He asks for two rand; I give him five instead. He smiles from ear to ear and gives me a high five.

I pedal down the road while sipping my cool drink. When I reach the traffic light, I see a hale and hearty old man known in our area as a no-nonsense usurer. He shouts my name, and I make a salutation gesture.

My ultimate destination is my friend’s home. It’s the most significant day of his life, his birthday. A bouquet of roses was tied in between my handlebars and I have it in my hand. Albeit my birthday was a few months away, we were born in the same year. He is now twenty-eight years old.



I reach a forked road and hook a left turn. I swill the last dregs of cool drink and throw the container in the receptacle. A municipal bus whooshes past me, generating a cool breeze that evaporates beads of sweat.

I reach a recreational park with trees aplenty planted haphazardly. I weave through them up until I reach a gate staffed by a dozing security guard. I clear my throat, and he is snapped out of his dreamland. When he recognises me, he flashes a Cheshire cat smile. We've known each other for the past ten years since I started to frequent this place.

He opens the gate. I alight from my bike and leave it under his watchful eye. I walk through the gate and pass by a row of graves. I go to one particular grave, kneel by it, and I recite a silent prayer. I remove some of the weeds with struggling fingers and then lay down the flowers I have brought with me.

My best friend since the loss of Sabelo had been Ntokozo. He too was lost ten years ago in an accident involving his bicycle and a car. Whenever I come to his grave, it evokes such feelings for which words continue to elude me. Where Sabelo's grave is, I know not, for his body was taken away by the state for an autopsy, but his family never did get him back for burial.

I always pay him homage whenever it is his birth or death day.

Rest in eternal peace, my bosom friends.





Nkosi Chili



THE JOURNAL OF AFRICAN YOUTH LITERATURE

# VISUAL ART





## Mandisa Shandu

Mandisa is born and bred in Richard's Bay in the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa. She is a student studying Psychology and Social Development at the University of Cape Town (UCT). *Isolation\_the feminine body* displayed on the opposite page took the prize for Visual Art at the 2021 UCT Res4Res competition.

Mandisa realised that she could draw from an early age in an arts and culture class. She fell in love with art because she could express herself through drawing and painting. Mandisa believes that art is a powerful language that can be understood by all as it can be translated and interpreted by anyone who encounters it.

Find Mandisa on [Instagram](#).



Mandisa Shandu

Isolation\_the feminine body

Winning visual arts piece by Mandisa Shandu at UCT Res4Res 2021.





THE JOURNAL OF AFRICAN YOUTH LITERATURE

# PLAYS





# Enoima Edem Okon

Enoima Edem Okon is an avid writer and a poet. She writes from Abuja, Nigeria and is a graduate of the University of Abuja. Her poems *The Seventeenth Jeremiah*, *Hallelujah of Passion*, and *What if We Fell in Love at the Wrong Time* as well as her short story *Troubled Blood* have been featured in *The Ducor Review*. Her poem *Shadows* was published by the Society of Young Nigerian Writers in 2020 in *Achebe: A Man of the People*, a poetry and essay anthology.





## An Introduction to the Play *Vashti*

*History will be kind to me for I intend to write it – Winston Churchill*

History is told by the victors or at least by those who get a platform, and these are generally men with an agenda. With relatively few ancient women writers known and under as serious study as the vast majority of religious, philosophical and (allegedly) *historical* texts, it is no wonder women still face sexism and paternalist justifications. We have precious few reports we can be sure were written by women about women and life in general.

It is high time for *herstory* to be told. *Vashti* is a feminist play that adapts a highly disputed biblical story presenting the titular Persian Queen as disloyal and rejected by her husband Ahasuerus, the King of Persia. Along with the exaggerated and suspicious details of the original story, Vashti is labelled prideful, stripped of her crown, and replaced by a younger woman. The latter is chosen for no other reason than her youth, beauty and virginity, characteristic of the patriarchal obsession with controlling women's bodies and minds.

The demand for passive obedience and the instability of patriarchal rule is revealed in the particular male anxiety that immediately comes to the fore. Vashti's decision not to appear before her unreasonable and drunk husband will lead other women to rebel against their husbands – across the entire kingdom – likely because they had many valid reasons to do so. This is very telling regarding the deep-seated fears of the patriarchy. If male domination is natural, necessary and somehow God's 'will', then why is it so unstable and insecure?

This exaggerated reaction to Vashti's behaviour suggests the precarious position of male dominance and its illogical nature. The story is unlikely to provide very much truth or clarity about the true situation at the Persian court. It was written based on the 'prejudices and predilections' of the authors, its re-tellers and translators – ultimately patriarchal dread of losing control over women and the need to reinforce oppression constantly through subtle coercion (Carruthers, 1994: 22). It is a weapon crafted to degrade so-called 'pagan' women, normalise and reinforce women's lower position, and exalt male authority.

Among many problems with the biblical story, there is no corroborating record of a Persian Queen being divorced and replaced by one from another nation. Persian kings rarely married outside a small number of families of the Persian nobility. It is also unclear who Ahasuerus was. The play presents a rehabilitated view of Vashti. This Persian Queen, regardless of whether she existed or not, has been deliberately obscured by the patriarchy of a later period for selfish reasons. Although the play presented here claims no historical accuracy, it is no less likely to have happened, and it presents a much more human and relatable story.

Despite the oppression and abuse of women and wives, even in the upper classes, as evident in the original account, Vashti refuses to be a mere showpiece for her husband. She declines a request to appear before the King as her only means to retain her dignity and for fear of his making of fool of himself while he is drunk. She is divorced as a result, revealing the tyranny of the patriarchal system.



# Enoima Edem Okon and Berren Thamper

In a quest to appease the drunk King and for political reasons, his court advisors encourage him to make a unilateral decision without consulting his wife. Vashti is found guilty without a logical or fair explanation. She is forced from her home and torn from her family without a thought for her value as a human being. The aim of such stories was to frighten women into obedience – the biblical account makes that clear.

Few have thus far pleaded on Vashti's behalf, cared to consider the reasons for her actions, or questioned the 'wisemen's' counsel. After 2 500 years, *Vashti* points to the terrible injustice and damage done by such patriarchal stories.

We would like to highlight the particular lineage of this play. Although many readers will identify the language as Shakespearean, the play is more closely related to and inspired by John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* as well as Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath*. The Duchess, likely based on the tragic true stories of Arbella Stuart and Catherine of Valois, is preyed upon and murdered by her scheming brothers.

A many hungry guests have fed upon me [...]  
Pull, and pull strongly, for your able strength,  
Must pull down heaven upon me:  
Yet stay, heaven-gates are not so highly arch'd  
As princes' palaces; they that enter there,  
Must go upon their knees. Come, violent death,  
Serve for mandragora, to make me sleep:  
Go, tell my brothers, when I am laid out,  
They then may feed in quiet.

*The Duchess of Malfi* by John Webster (IV.II 185, 258-265)

On the Wife of Bath, Mary Carruthers (1994: 22) explains: 'The fable of painting the lion [told by the Wife] teaches that the truth of any picture often has more to do with the prejudices and predilections of the painter than with the reality of the subject and that truthful art (and morality) must take account of this complexly mutual relationship'.

The play is inspired by Webster and Chaucer and was prompted by similar injustice towards women in Africa, particularly in Nigeria. A creative revisionist project such as *Vashti* is dangerous as it can be associated with heresy and dissidence, risks Webster and Chaucer themselves readily took. It is justified protest that is more urgent and necessary as feminists strive to revolutionise society.





Who peyntede the leon, tel me who?  
By God, if wommen hadde writen stories,  
As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,  
They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse  
Than al the mark of Adam may redresse.

Who painted the lion, tell me who?  
By God, if women had written stories,  
As clerks have within their studies,  
They would have written of men more wickedness  
Than all the male sex could set right.

*The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* from  
*The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer (ll. 692-696)

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***Vashti: Ancient Beauty* by Cara Helene**





# Vashti

## Synopsis

Queen Vashti of Persia is called to parade herself before a banquet of drunk nobles by King Ahasuerus. She refuses, choosing her own dignity instead and fearing that Ahasuerus will make a fool of himself. The King is influenced by his scheming advisor Memucan to divorce her.

Memucan stresses that Vashti's example will lead more women to rebel. Eunuchs guarding Vashti try to prevent the injustice and are held back by the nobles. The King is distressed after he sobers up but is too proud to admit his mistake. Disorder and discontent follow at the court, and Ahasuerus seeks a new advisor. Vashti has supporters but remains an outcast until her untimely death.

## Characters

TWO NARRATORS, one woman and one man

VASHTI, Queen of Persia

AHASUERUS, King of Persia

MEMUCAN, the King’s adviser

HUSSEIN and FARZAD, two of the King’s Chamberlains attending at the court

CHAMBERLAINS, two additional Chamberlains attending at the court

NOBLES, princes, governors, ministers, and other upper-class men

SOLDIERS

ATTENDANTS serving at the court

GUARDS of the King

CYRA and IRSIA, wives of the nobles attending Vashti

NEDA, Irsia’s daughter

LADIES, several additional wives of the nobles and young women attending Vashti

EUNUCHS guarding Vashti

HAMAN, one of the King’s nobles

HEGE, keeper of the maidens

# Enoima Edem Okon and Berren Thamper

## Act I Scene I

*The Persian throne room. King AHASUERUS is on his throne surrounded by NOBLES and SOLDIERS. Classical music fills the cold room.*

### NARRATOR 1

For she was fair to look upon,  
thus the King thought to show her off,  
as did he the other beauties of his kingdom.

### NARRATOR 2

Oh, in the third year of his reign,  
King Ahasuerus had organized a banquet  
for his nobles, ministers, governors and officials.  
The exhibition lasted for six months.

### NOBLE

Six months indeed! *[Laughs and then toasts the audience.]*

### NARRATOR 2

During this time, he made sure to demonstrate  
and brag about the wealth and splendours  
of his kingdom, what he'd won and achieved  
since the day he was installed as King.  
On the grand finale week, he summoned everyone,  
I mean everyone – important and unimportant  
to Shushan, the kingdom's capital,  
the seat of the palace to feast.

### NARRATOR 1

All the Powers of Persia and Media were gathered,  
men of timber and calibres.

### NARRATOR 2

Shushan, the palace was arrayed in its highest glory,  
blue, purple and white were colours of the day.  
Wines were the generous river flowing in every man's cup,  
indeed, it was a feast at its flattering height.

*NOBLES are toasting golden chalices in the air, chattering and cheering, with ATTENDANTS on their tails to refill royal wine as desired.*

### NOBLE

O! Our King, the only power of our kingdom,  
the wealth and wits of Persia and Media,  
may your reign last forever.

### AHASUERUS

*[Aside:]* Indeed all powers belongs to me, so are you all.  
*[Palms on his chest, caressing in a showy tomfoolery]*





AHASUERUS cont.

Loveth all that has been shown thee,  
even to this hundred and fourscore days?  
Yet! I'll show you more that you in all this time hath not seen,  
contained in one,  
such that thine eyes would blink a-gaze.  
*[Signalling waiters to refill his cup with wine]*  
Haaa! Days and days of unending merriment,  
upon mine heart hath the savour of wines pleased with its sweet scents.  
*[Spreads his arms sideways]* Where are my Chamberlains?

HUSSEIN

Here we stand at your service, Your Majesty.

AHASUERUS

Quickly! Hussein and Farzad  
and a few of you, my Chamberlains,  
enter the haram, you've now my permission.  
See for yourselves the prettiest property of your King.  
Come tell our nobles and wise men of  
what all you see there.  
Then have the attending ladies bring  
Vashti the Universal Queen before me  
and on her weighty crown. It is a heavy weight  
for her slender neck. See to it she has support.  
Let mine nobles, princes and officials witness for themselves,  
that compared to the beauties of my kingdom,  
she's the peak of all beauties.  
And let this company see the great jewels I have taken  
to hoist upon the Queen of Queens.

FARZAD

We shall see all this done, my King.

*Exit HUSSEIN, FARZAD, and CHAMBERLAINS.*

## Act I Scene II

*VASHTI is in her chamber, dressed in a white flowing gown with a blue band around her waist. LADIES of class, WIVES of nobles, and EUNUCHS are present. VASHTI appears deep in thought and lonely to one side. Only the EUNUCHS stand close by and guard her.*

*Enter CHAMBERLAINS with heads bowed, arms behind.*

FARZAD

O! Queen of queens, the one with whom all beauties lies,  
the King this day desires thy presence in his chamber.

# Enoima Edem Okon and Berren Thamper

*VASHTI is kept mute for 60 seconds and does not move, while the rest of the players continue with their business in mime and do not make any noise. Then VASHTI nods to the EUNUCHS who respond by standing at ease.*

**VASHTI**

*[Turns to the CHAMBERLAINS:]* Welcome you Farzad, Hussein, and welcome to all the Chamberlains.

Have you the permission of the King to enter this place?

My eunuchs must see you out if he has not.

**HUSSEIN**

His express permission, but a few moments ago given.

**VASHTI**

*[Addressing HUSSEIN:]* Then Hussein, pure of heart, be ever a friend to me as you are to every noble here.

*[Addressing all the CHAMBERLAINS:]* Tell me Chamberlains, what state is the King?

**CHAMBERLAIN 1**

He on this day remains King o'er the entire kingdom, my Queen.

**VASHTI**

*[Kindly:]* Nay, prithee, what I ask after is the state of mind of the King. What is his humour? I have not seen my husband for many weeks.

**HUSSEIN**

*[Cheerful with respect:]* He is very merry and presidential, as ever a King was.

**VASHTI**

*[Cautiously:]* Is his face bright, is it dull with scarlet today? Has he had enjoyed much of the wine?

**FARZAD**

He is very bright with scarlet and it becomes his manhood well.

**VASHTI**

This matter in all the state concerns me gravely.

*VASHTI stands to her feet. The CHAMBERLAINS fumble backwards a few steps in uniformity.*

**VASHTI cont.**

*[Smiling at the CHAMBERLAINS:]* If I were in need of clowns, don't you suppose I'd sure have one in my chamber already? I ask again, what is the King's humour?





**FARZAD**

As simple as a goat kid before his nobles, my Queen.

*[Pause, then with concern and more quietly, as he looks up at VASHTI:]*

In sooth, my lady, all the men have much of the wine.

**VASHTI**

*[Aside, sadly:]* This means my husband is likely to grow quick with rage moment to moment.

*[To the CHAMBERLAINS, gravely:]* Well then, be gone with it, give the King mine reply, I am tending to my women.

**NARRATOR 2**

There was a general silence in the Queen's chamber, maidens pursed their lips, matrons looked round with nought to say. The Queen had dared to say 'No'.

**NARRATOR 1**

The Chamberlains, they loitered around the Queen's chamber. From time to time, they'd peep through the silvered cotton to see the Queen. Peradventure, she'd change her mind.

**CYRA**

My Queen, may I say a word?

Has it ever been heard that anyone ever said nay to the King?

**VASHTI**

Nay! But I know the King more than you all.

All the men are with the King, excited with wine.

Men may do regrettable deeds when such is the case.

I would men be raised up.

I could not see a man down,

nor sooner risk my own pate among them *[indicating her head]*.

*The EUNUCHS notice this and draw closer to the Queen protectively.*

**VASHTI cont.**

*[To the CHAMBERLAINS:]* Say, let me come to him when he retires to quiet.

**CYRA**

*[Kindly and with concern:]* My Queen, you are more beautiful measured up to all the women in the kingdom.

The King is well pleased in you.

Not all women find favour before their husbands.

I would thee reconsider,

*[pause, thoughtfully:]* but for the wine...

# Enoima Edem Okon and Berren Thamper

## IRSIA

[*Aside:*] First, she's the beauty of beauties  
and also chosen of the King.  
She is to be shown before all the powers  
of Persia and Media present in great jewels.  
But she rejects such honour; what a prideful wench!  
I've sort such attention all my days but got none.

## VASHTI

He is my husband and I, his wife.  
I've shown him all my charms for as many times  
as desired in the closet and shall do so again this night.  
But a public display before his nobles,  
officials and the simpletons, such I'd decline.  
After the feast, he will think better on it and apprehend my concern.

*A little time passes and the LADIES tend VASHTI who is in deep thought but tries to be cheerful. The CHAMBERLAINS look to VASHTI and she shakes her head firmly at them. The EUNUCHS stand at ease.*

## NARRATOR 2

For as many times the Queen sighted the  
King's Chamberlains,  
she'd give a look that owned their retreats.

*VASHTI now grows distressed and the EUNUCHS, seeing this, draw close to her protectively.*

## VASHTI

[*To the CHAMBERLAINS:*] For the hundredth time,  
go, give the King mine reply.  
Ne'er will I leave my porch,  
not even for the grants of half his kingdom,  
not even for heaven's cry.

## CYRA

[*To VASHTI, indicating affection and great concern for her:*]  
Are you ready for the consequence, oh mighty beloved?  
Your feet are not secure, not so much as last you lay with his majesty.  
His mind is now upon all ornaments.  
Make pageantry for the court.

## VASHTI

[*Looking confused and around at the faces of all the WIVES and LADIES:*]  
This day was bound to come.  
I will make no pageantry.  
I have chosen the King's reputation above all,  
I have also chosen my dignity.

*The EUNUCHS come together and discuss something serious among themselves, while keeping an eye on VASHTI.*





IRSIA

*[Aside, haughty:]* How can she be so foolish?

This prideful whore of the King should be cast out the palace gates.

Perchance the King will choose my daughter this day for his bed.

She is not so pretty nor so delicate as Vashti.

But she's well used 'o drunken fools.

CYRA

*[Aside with distress:]* I know not whether I see this

great woman again in the right safe place she deserves.

## Act II Scene I

*The throne room, where AHASUERUS and the NOBLES make merry.*

NARRATOR 1

Everyone awaited the Queen's grand entry in eagerness.

Seconds, minutes, hours and moments had passed,

but the great beauty had not appeared.

Where is the beauty of beauties as postulated by his majesty?

Or had he lied to them in their nobility?

*Enter CHAMBERLAINS.*

CHAMBERLAIN 1

*[Heads bowed, arms behind]* Please, a word for the King!

AHASUERUS

*[His smile turns to a deep frown]* Why return ye alone?

HUSSEIN

The Queen refuseth to leave her women.

Yet permit me a brief word in your ear, Sire.

NARRATOR 1

There was silence everywhere.

And all hands grew still.

The eyes of thousands,

as present, were on the King,

heads cog to see what he'd do.

AHASUERUS

*[Ignoring HUSSEIN, he gnashes his teeth ferociously, his chest moves up and down, his chin, the target. A loud call:]* WI-S-E M-E-N!

NARRATOR 1

They gathered before the King every wise man present.

# Enoima Edem Okon and Berren Thamper

## AHASUERUS

*[Sweating on his face]* I could consume fire itself this instant.  
See to thy knowledge wise man Memucan that I don't.  
Provide me this day a lasting counsel on her my wife.

## MEMUCAN

O! King, Vashti the Queen wronged thee not alone,  
such an act would cause rebellion of women to any throne,  
exemplifying for them, a stubborn stronghold,  
to despise their husbands and their household  
along the length and breadth of your entire territory.  
Not a woman shall hear her husband evermore.  
Command ye this day my King,  
wives shall give their husbands honour,  
she must withstand great or small abuse and let him have none.  
And let it, O! King,  
be published throughout with the symbol of thy ring.  
Let Vashti the Queen be no more royal,  
but her crown be given to whom would be loyal.

## NARRATOR 1

Everyone's head nodded in uniformity,  
in agreement to the wise man's counsel.  
The King was pleased,  
and the deal was sealed.

## NARRATOR 2

And so was it to be performed?  
Would Vashti be uncrowned Queen?  
And would she be banished from the palace?

*Sorrowful music plays.*

## Act II Scene I

*As previous.*

## MEMUCAN

*[Aside:]* The King is simple to convictions,  
less it comes to pass, the moment we're adjourned,  
he be won over by Vashti,  
she who has not favoured me for promotion?  
I must see to it that the matter is settled this instant.  
*[To AHASUERUS:]* My King, iron is well smitten while it be hot,  
I propose this matter be performed this day.





**AHASUERUS**

Ye are a wise man,  
I'm well pleased with your counsels.

**MEMUCAN**

My King, see to it that ye go not into the Queen's chamber.  
Let her be brought before the court straight or bent.  
Let the matter be patterned and uncluttered this very day.  
Remember, a King's honour is esteemed by his words and actions.

**AHASUERUS**

Hussein, Farzad, draw near,  
I wouldn't that my orders stagger twice.  
Quickly, storm the haram, seize my wench of a wife and bring her before.  
[As they hasten away, AHASUERUS calls after them:]  
Show not thy faces to me except you have her with you.  
Be gone with it.

*Exit the CHAMBERLAINS.*

## **Act II Scene II**

*Outside VASHTI'S chamber. EUNUCHS guard the door. Enter HUSSEIN, FARZAD and other CHAMBERLAINS.*

**HUSSEIN**

O fellows, I prithee, hurry slowly.  
We must see to it that no harm is brought upon the Queen.  
Or have you forgotten the good old days,  
when upon her pleads,  
we were let loosed of the King's bands?  
When we went silly and became unfit for the palace rays,  
our heads were almost gone, but she intercepted.  
She always knew what words to entreat the King  
to have us all preserved. Let kindness ne'er be forgotten.  
You stay here at the corridor while I go into the haram.

*The CHAMBERLAINS struggle with the EUNUCHS to break into the chamber despite HUSSEIN'S request.*

**FARZAD**

Down with it!  
Have you lost all heeds for your Queen?  
For as long as she's confined in the palace,  
she remains our Queen.

*The CHAMBERLAINS give up but the EUNUCHS are wary of them. They allow HUSSEIN into the Queen's chamber. FARZAD stays out to help restrain the others from breaking in.*

# Enoima Edem Okon and Berren Thamper

VASHTI

Hussein, you are here for the second time, is all well?  
And why art thou cast down?  
Your countenance hangs like an old rag on a line,  
an embodiment of distress, prithee, say something.

HUSSEIN

The King...

VASHTI

Is all well with him?

HUSSEIN

He groweth quick with wrath moment to moment.  
There is no temperament in him and the nobles,  
they tend to fuel his fire.  
He commanded that you be seized by crook or straight.  
But as surely as I'm here, no harm shall come upon the Queen.  
Prithee, come in your consent.

*Exit ALL.*

## Act II Scene IV

*The throne room. Enter VASHTI, LADIES and WIVES, CHAMBERLAINS and EUNUCHS.*

NARRATOR 1

Women were never to speak whenever the King  
was with his officials.  
Less she was granted audience by the King  
through the demonstration of his sceptre.

NARRATOR 2

And so Vashti kept eye contact with the King.  
Perhaps he'd read through her eyes and be reckoned with her.

AHASUERUS

*[Staggers a bit]* Vashti, alas ye appear before me.  
*[He turns away from her]*  
For as long obedience was found in thee,  
you remained my wife this for ten and four years,  
but today, you did chose to err,  
thus shall you have a taste of your action.  
From this day onward, you shall be no more Queen  
and cease to live in my palace.  
*[Pauses and examines the faces of his NOBLES who wait to know his judgement]*  
Guards, strip her of my weighty crown.

*VASHTI falls before the King.*





**NARRATOR 1**

As soon as the word left the King's mouth,  
Battalions of guards surrounded Vashti, grasp her by the arm,  
Like a criminal on the run.

**AHASUERUS**

Take her to the outskirt of my palace,  
my kingdom, or wheresoever suits you.  
[*Thundering:*] But be certain 'tis where our paths will  
ne'er thread again.

*AHASUERUS stands off to one side alone.*

**NARRATOR 2**

They laid hands on the Queen, the guards.  
They jerked on her wrist as though she was not,  
and her crown tossed carelessly as though 'twas made of wood.  
[*Disgusted:*] The one whose face they could never bring  
their eyes to look on, now wallows for mercy like a commoner.  
Respect does not live here.

**NOBLE**

So the Queen's purpose has returned  
to show women how they must fear men always.

**CYRA**

Be careful with her!

**IRSIA**

[*Aside:*] My daughter shall make a better queen.  
[*Laughing:*] What if I make a better queen instead?  
Either way, the palace shall be mine.

**MEMUCAN**

Away with her.

**HUSSEIN**

[*Fallen before MEMUCAN:*] Wise man of our time, I prithee,  
revisit this matter with the King, for he yields to your counsels.  
Perhaps he'll hearken and...

**MEMUCAN**

Fool, off my garment.  
What right have you to make such request of me?  
Know this, whenever great matters of the  
kingdom are discussed, servants like you are never considered.  
You are nothing but one of my foot kissers,  
and if I want it this day, I'll be sure the King banishes you  
alongside your undeserving Queen.

# Enoima Edem Okon and Berren Thamper

## NARRATOR 1

While Vashti was dragged off the throne,  
the King was no more in sight.  
He'd moved to the hidden section of the palace  
where shades were thicker.

## NARRATOR 2

His eyes were reddened, once more contact with Vashti,  
and he'd try to undo his command, for even in sorrow,  
she appears far irresistible to him.

## AHASUERUS

I must act firm.  
[To his guards:] Why are you still here?  
Would ye that I bring mattress so ye sleep while at it?  
Move, I want everything about her off my palace.

## IRSIA

It's finally happening, the day I've long wished for,  
to see the prettiest of us all tagged the ugliest.  
Let us see what becomes of her beauty without the crown.

## NARRATOR 1

Vashti's eunuchs watched helplessly, powerless against the King,  
powerless against his nobles.  
The simpletons stood confused,  
could someone make clear the matter to them?  
Yesterday she was their Queen, today she's not.  
The nobles were gladdened, for now they'd do  
same to their wives if ever they revolted against their commands.  
But had Vashti wronged the King away in his closet  
for such public display of outright rejection?  
No one would ever know.

*The EUNUCHS cannot keep calm any longer. They rush in to try to rescue VASHTI from the  
GUARDS' maltreatment, but are pushed away by the NOBLES. Exit AHASUERUS.  
Pandemonium breaks out in the palace.*

*Light fades...*





## Act III Scene I

*The throne room. Some time later.*

### NARRATOR 2

She was dropped off the palace outskirt,  
where she wandered all alone,  
for Memucan had ordered all eunuchs to stay back.  
The Chamberlains owed their loyalties to him as well,  
they could only step out of the palace with relief of duty.  
The nobles gave their wives the look that retreated their feet,  
none wished to be fated as Vashti.

### NARRATOR 1

Several months passed,  
and the palace has never remained the same,  
everyone lived in confusion.  
There was no queen to oversee daily activities  
in the palace as before.  
Joy was wearied away from the faces of palace inhabitants.

### NARRATOR 2

[*To NARRATOR 1:*] He's always enraged, the King,  
scourging out wrath on anyone whose luck was not for the day.  
The Chamberlains now adjusted to  
his distress calls the moment he waked,  
neither did they give their eyes to sleep at night.  
For as long as the King couldn't stop calling unto  
Vashti in his dreams, they thought he was fully awake.

### AHASUERUS

[*As if awakening from a dream in horror:*] It is. It is!  
All I have done is marked down.  
My law is fixed, written in the breath of... the breath of cheap wine!  
[*Looking at himself:*] Oh, I am base! And fully alone in this anguish.  
Who indeed can I speak to of such foolishness?  
She can never return to me. Whatever can be set right?  
Let me distract myself in attendance to labours of my court.  
[*Recalling Vashti again, he is pained and gives out a loud screech. Then calling:*]  
Hus-sein, Far-zad! [*Curses under his breath.*]

### NARRATOR 1

Here we go yet again, each day this ritual.

### AHASUERUS

Take my word, give it to my nobles.  
Say to them, the King shall appoint his  
right-hand man by the morrow. One who'd oversee  
to daily politics of the palace in the manner as did... [*pause*].  
What is the matter? [*He roars:*] Be gone with it.

*Exit HUSSEIN and FARZAD.*

# Enoima Edem Okon and Berren Thamper

## Act III Scene II

*The outer rooms of the court.*

**NARRATOR 1**

Could someone tell the King that he needs a her not a him?

**NARRATOR 2**

Following the King's issued out message,  
Nobles had gathered at Shushan, the palace,  
and were ready to take up promotion to the  
political office once held by Vashti.

*Enter HUSSEIN.*

**HUSSEIN**

Greetings great nobles of our kingdom.  
The King shall acquaint your presence soon.  
If I may, could I say a word and hope to be heard?

**NOBLE**

Go on.

**HUSSEIN**

The King doth greatly esteem your counsels,  
prithee, plead with him. Peradventure he'd repent  
of his wrath and restore Vashti as Queen.

**MEMUCAN**

You must be a dog, to love your mistress than your King.  
Tell me, with whom does your loyalty lie?  
Ought it not with the King be, who'd considered so  
minute your status to serve in the palace,  
you insignificant fool?  
[To NOBLES:] Gentlemen, pay no attention to this mole, can ye not see?  
The moment Vashti is restored,  
the very reason for our gathering would be in vain.  
If she be restored, then we've lost all hope of promotion.  
[Aside:] Although certainly, I'm sure,  
the King would place me above ye'all.  
[To HUSSEIN:] I see ye'll never stop less  
your mistress be restored, hmmm.  
[To NOBLES:] Gentlemen, I say we shut him up forever,  
for as long as he be alive and around the palace,  
he might run into luck someday and the King  
be convinced of him. Or would ye suppose this  
insignificant dog be promoted rather than you?  
He'd remove us to have his mistress restored  
and it'll be our heads in exchange. Think gentlemen, think.





**NARRATOR 1**

And the matter pleased the nobles,  
for they knew how badly they've behaved towards Vashti.  
And so Hussein was surrounded,  
beaten to stupor and was prepared to be dragged out.

*HUSSEIN is beaten by the NOBLES while MEMUCAN goads them on.*

*Enter AHASUERUS.*

**AHASUERUS**

Halt! Arrest all commotion this instant!  
[*Walking closer, seeing HUSSEIN:*] What, Hussein!  
Whose scheme was this?

**MEMUCAN**

O King, this matter will certainly be of interest to you.  
This man's loyalty lies with Vashti,  
the one in whom ye are displeased,  
for she'd committed such an unpardonable  
crime against thee and thy kingdom.

**AHASUERUS**

You don't say.

**MEMUCAN**

My King, he is an enemy of your kingdom,  
his loyalty lies not with you.

**AHASUERUS**

Alas, we well know with whom his loyalty lies.  
[*Directly to MEMUCAN:*] Can it be said of thee?  
Pick him up, see to it that you pay for his treatment  
and all you must make him recompense.

*HUSSEIN gets up on his own but can barely stand on his feet.*

*Enter HAMAN.*

**AHASUERUS cont.**

Welcome Haman,  
you're just right in time for my decision.  
Though you appear the least in the order  
of positioning in the affairs of my kingdom,  
now shall you esteem above all,  
for so have I promoted thee this day.

**NARRATOR**

It couldn't be, the table was spun  
and Memucan was overturned.

# Enoima Edem Okon and Berren Thamper

MEMUCAN

O King, I wish not to question your decision,  
but I stand to remind thee of your promise to me:  
“I shall make thee my right-hand man”.

AHASUERUS

Leave now that you still maintain your current position.  
I have matters to attend to with Haman.

*Exit ALL.*

## Act IV Scene I

*A cave-like building. Enter CYRA, FARZAD and some EUNUCHS bearing jars, cloth and baskets.*

*FARZAD and EUNUCHS exchange pleasantries quietly with VASHTI and then step out to keep surveillance of the environment.*

VASHTI

[*Sighs*] O Cyra, come here. [*hugging her*]  
You have no idea of how I've longed for your presence.  
You, Hussein and a few kind eunuchs  
have become my only family.  
When days had gone by and your faces I sighted not,  
I am disquieted.

CYRA

My Queen.

VASHTI

Will you not cease from addressing me thus?  
No crown have I on my head,  
nor hold an office worthy of that position.

CYRA

A Queen's honour is not by the number of her crown.  
I've always esteemed thee above thy crown while in the palace,  
even so now have you command more, my respect.

VASHTI

Neither have I a copper coin to my name.  
Poverty is my newfound companion.  
I am nothing like the Queen you once knew.  
Reckon me as a commoner I now am.  
[*Pauses*] Away with that. Prithee, how are my precious ones?

*CYRA is silent. VASHTI senses something is amiss.*





VASHTI cont.

Prithee Cyra, what status is the faithful Hussein?  
Is it well with him?  
He'd ne'er failed to visit but today.

CYRA

He at this point fights for his life,  
for so had the King's nobles made a mockery  
of him some days back.

VASHTI

O Cyra! Do not hold back anything, tell me all.

CYRA

Not a thing has remained the same around the palace  
since the time of your disregard.  
The King would be heard crying in his chamber,  
even in his dreams, all he does is cry out your name.  
A few days ago, he summoned for all his nobles  
to appear before him, to promote one who'd oversee  
some matters of politics such that you often performed.  
Hussein, faithful as ever, had pleaded the nobles to  
consider your restoration as Queen,  
but Memucan spate on his request and made  
a pig show of him with the help of others.

VASHTI

[Sobs:] Poor Hussein, I brought this upon him.  
I feared this would happen, and 'tis but a matter of time  
before the eunuchs would be forced to keep off me.

CYRA

Bigthana and Teresh the eunuchs,  
two keepers of the door you shall well know,  
so much vexed at the injustice, sought audience  
and growing more enraged, would lay hand on the King.  
They were caught, for they were few in number.  
Their fates are yet to be decided.  
Many eunuchs would revolt,  
if only there were a good number of them.

VASHTI

In all these, I have but just a wish,  
let no harm come upon the King.

CYRA

I baffle at the nature of your soul.  
So pure your intentions towards the King,  
even till now.

# Enoima Edem Okon and Berren Thamper

VASHTI

Tell me, which noble promoted he?

CYRA

Haman.

VASHTI

Haman, the son of Hammedatha?

CYRA

You speak as though you know so well.

VASHTI

I surely do know him so well.

Hammedatha was once a Chamberlain

during my father's reign as King.

He was married to one of the palace maids and begat Haman.

Haman and I were brought in the palace.

His father was present during my union with the King.

CYRA

Do you think Haman would act in your favour?

VASHTI

Enough of this desire for my restoration.

Having made up my mind to take my stance,

I am now the commander of my fate,

and I'll stay faithful to it till the end.

My prayer is that Haman esteems the kingdom

above all things, such as I did.

CYRA

I admire you more each day.

Never seen much of persons who regards

everyone and everything before self, nay,

not as ye are.

## Act IV Scene II

*The palace. A loud wailing is heard off-stage from the left side.*

*Enter AHASUERUS from the left.*

AHASUERUS

Nonsense, bunch of no-sense making individuals,

get out of my sight!





**NARRATOR 1**

From the day Vashti was ousted,  
no human actions please the King anymore.  
Not even the performance of his promoted noble.

*Exit AHASUERUS to the right. Enter FARZAD and NOBLES.*

**FARZAD**

Less one of these days, the King be as a wild animal  
and prey on us, I will suggest to him that there  
be fair young virgins sought for, and let the maiden  
that pleases him be made Queen in place of Vashti.  
Thus the palace shall observe its peaceful status just as before.

*Exit FARZAD and NOBLES.*

**NARRATOR 2**

And the matter appeared to please the King.  
He appointed for the assignment officers in all the provinces.  
They gathered all the fair young virgins  
at Shushan the palace for purification.  
Yet long they awaited his attention.

*Enter HEGE, followed by IRSIA.*

**IRSIA**

Hege, the amicable one.  
I must commend you for your diligent services  
rendered the King all these years.

**HEGE**

Greetings, many hail me such as you my lady.  
I've found favour in ladies' sights.

**IRSIA**

In favour, you have found.  
In desires, I shall grant thee. But name it.

**HEGE**

My lady, I stand to be informed,  
upon what ground had this entreating found me?

**IRSIA**

The King has gathered all fair virgins of his kingdom  
here and has made thee their custodian.  
Is the office not worth the spread of thy fame?

*IRSIA moves closer to him, but HEGE, feeling uncomfortable, retreats from her.*

# Enoima Edem Okon and Berren Thamper

IRSIA cont.

It will be in your great interest to know  
that my daughter has come of age,  
and she is more of a virgin than all the  
virgins in the kingdom.  
She's gathered here as well.

HEGE

Prithee, my lady, of what use is this information to me?

IRSIA

See to it that she's chosen of the King.  
Surely you shall have whatsoever reward you desire.

HEGE

My lady, I am only but the King's Chamberlain.  
I have no control o'er whom the King's heart would beat after.  
But this I'm certain about, I shall treat all maidens  
equally and process them to the test of the King.

IRSIA

Yet the King's desires, you possess this knowledge.  
Let it be known only to my daughter.  
When she's Queen, your status will be no more a Chamberlain,  
yielding to commands all your life,  
but you shall rule of the provinces and  
give orders to whomever you wish to walk upon.

HEGE

I'd rather be a gatekeeper in the palace  
than bring my esteem low to the state you seek to place me.  
With your permission, I shall take my leave, lady Irsia.

*EXIT HEGE.*

IRSIA

Lady Irsia? That insignificant fool.  
He dares to call my name.  
If I was raised in a royal home like Vashti,  
I'd been the chosen one for the King and  
you all would call me Queen!

*Enter NEDA.*

IRSIA

*[Addressing NEDA as she walks through to the King:]*  
I have had words with Hege. He is of no use to us, Neda my daughter.  
Go in then and be sure you emerge Queen.  
We all know you are no virgin and art known to this manner.  
Perhaps your exhibits will bring us the kingdom.





NEDA

As you wish mother.

*Exit NEDA.*

NARRATOR 1

After twelve months, according to the time of purification,  
Six months with oil and myrrh,  
and yet another six months with sweet perfumes,  
The maidens with their minted virginity were purified  
and given beauty treatment upon treatment.

NARRATOR 2

A bath would suffice.  
It is but men's minds that think they come in unclean.

NARRATOR 1

Each maiden went into the King accordingly in their turns.  
By custom, she went in the evening and returned in the morning,  
For thus she'd please the King the whole night.

NARRATOR 2

And if he was most pleased of a maiden, she wouldn't return anymore,  
Instead, the rest of the maidens would be dismissed.

*Re-enter NEDA, followed by HEGE.*

NARRATOR 1

No sooner had Neda stepped into the King's  
chamber than she returned.  
For thus the King was turned off his glory  
the moment she walked into his chamber.

IRSIA

[*To HEGE:*] The rule is, a maiden go in the evening and return in the morning.  
Then why was my daughter turned down before the show begun?

HEGE

There is no such rule per se.  
And no one questions the King's decisions.  
If he said nay, then it is nay.

IRSIA

Nay, I refuse. Take me to the King,  
perhaps he'll take interest and go in with me.  
If I'm not conferred as Queen,  
I'd sure make a good concubine.

# Enoima Edem Okon and Berren Thamper

*IRSIA tries to break her way to the King's chamber, but there is a struggle with the GUARDS and she is removed from the palace.*

## NARRATOR 2

After the King have had a test of all the virgins present,  
he finally picked one and placed a crown on her to be his Queen.  
The rest remained as concubines and went not unto the King again,  
less he desired them.

## Act V Scene I

*VASHTI on her sickbed, weak and pale.*

### VASHTI

I stood upon my watch from the window days ago,  
and observed candles of joy from the palace.  
Such as could only be seen when there was a banquet.  
Prithee, do not lie to me in my last hour,  
what meaneth this celebration?

### HUSSEIN

The King was in search of a new queen.

### VASHTI

Has he found her?

### HUSSEIN

I'm afraid so, my lady.  
Your royal crown is upon her head.  
There has been a great feast unto all his nobles and servants,  
gifts released to each province for help in search of the finest virgins.  
All these took place for twelve month long.  
'Twas a long time without a queen for the court to look to.  
The nobles made strict order, no chamberlain, guard or  
eunuch leave the palace until the purification  
and selection rite season was o'er.

### VASHTI

I see why you all were no more at my side.

### HUSSEIN

Not perhaps, I think, for the maidens.  
There is much discontent about court.  
The air swelters with a dank moss  
and anyone's foot is quickly snatched upon it.  
Green filaments are as whatsoever trifle stroking tenderest places  
and men madden with gall in their throat for it.





HUSSEIN cont.

Lights of joy do burn in the open,  
yet a scone against the wall is more fitted among the hanging.

*Enter CYRA and EUNUCHS with herbs and medicines.*

CYRA

How are you dear woman?

VASHTI

It has been twelve months of torture and pain,  
and death had refused to bid my cry for an end.  
Sometimes I'd lay on my rustic mat and gaze on the dark,  
it was the only beauty left after the nightmare of each day.  
The moment I closed to sleep, I'd be surrounded by  
forces of darkness chasing me to my doom.  
When I wake, I'd realise all were true,  
for thus my body was still in this world although  
my spirit hangs in another realm.  
Nay, I'm certain I'd not last till morrow.  
This ailment hearkens not to medicines.  
I've done all I could, if I could see a physician at its earliest stage,  
I'd be survived. But 'tis too late now.  
Observe the depth of the scales on my skin,  
I have no life anymore.  
An abandoned property of the King.  
Wouldn't it be of pleasure to have a taste of what made  
the King refer to her as the most beautiful?  
We shall take turns and dread as many times as wished,  
for thus our lucks bids us well –  
These, the sons of perdition said when they  
forcefully accessed where I dwell.  
And so a many hungry men preyed upon me.  
I became their point of entry and exit.  
Days were no different from nights.  
The little coppers I had, they napped them all.  
I had given up the ghost,  
but for kind gestures of some few,  
who lent me their leftovers.  
But as soon as they were gone,  
the sons of perdition would return [*sobs profusely*].

*The others present begin to lament.*

HUSSEIN

I will never forgive myself. I let you down.  
Prithee, forgive me my Queen.

# Enoima Edem Okon and Berren Thamper

VASHTI

Nay, Hussein.

Ye almost lost life in order to save mine.

I owe you an apology, forgive me.

Oh, how I prayed that my case wouldn't be the end of you.

And now my heart leaps for joy seeing you still standing.

Do not cry so much for me.

Instead, let's have some joy in good old memories.

Back in the days when I was the King's favourite,  
he had concubines but he chose to be with me often.

I'd take my seat by his side whenever we journeyed on  
a ceremonial function to neighbouring kingdoms.

He delegated some matters of politics to me and  
considered my words when his wrath tried to take hold of him.

There was so much more...

[*Sighs:*] But there was a side to him that I begun to see,  
when he took hold of the golden cup,  
he never stops till he was knocked out.

I was always there to cover him up.

Same habit of his that has caused me this state.

I wished I never agreed to this plan,  
the stretching out of the feast which ushered in my fate.

CYRA

Nay my Queen, ye did what a woman ought  
to always do, support her husband.

But he took his state out upon his Queen.

No matter what place of mind he was as at that moment,  
what worst a crime committed  
you that could not be pardoned?

VASHTI

The King has moved on, I too shall move.

I was the author of my fate and I've stayed faithful to it.

It is well you came this day.

I do not have another to spare.

[*Using the last of her strength:*] Let the King live forever  
innocent and with his word 'graved in stone but  
let me be swept unto the margin of history.

If it is else, I will be too remembered and my name used  
as a sharp point for staking wives to the ground.

Prithee, love my precious ones but do not tell them of me.

Let them be happy and think not of me, and you,  
do not recall me. Speak not of me.

Now I shall wander and deviate from the page of history.

Draw the veil across and do not look, my friends, how I go.

*CYRA clings to VASHTI'S hands and keeps her eyes on her even though VASHTI would not be seen at all. HUSSEIN turns away and sobs. VASHTI dies. The company is in great distress. The EUNUCHS lift her body and carry her out.*





**NARRATOR 1**

She indeed moved on, but unto a sorrow-free life.  
The yoke and burden of mockery was lifted off.  
Only the dead knows what life it endured.

**CYRA**

We must prepare her body for the burial rites.  
We shall bury her in three days' time,  
at the completion of every rite.  
Hussein, prithee, help me prepare a bath for her cleansing.  
Although none of her relations are present,  
I shall stand in the gap, for I've been acquainted of her,  
she'd treated me as family.  
I shall wash and oil her body to chase away  
evil spirits from her urvarā.  
Let them say as they would of her,  
evil shall not penetrate this one,  
for so she'd remained while with us.

**HUSSEIN**

While you do this my lady,  
I shall prepare white roses for her mound.  
This we must always bring to her and bring  
offering on Hamaspathmaedaya  
in honour of the spirit of our dead.  
So she shall forever live in our hearts.

**NARRATOR 2**

Her body was prepared for burial rites,  
Cyra washed and oiled her body, for she was same in gender.  
She was wrapped with white linen and positioned  
in the room to be watched and prayed for three days  
where her spirit is believed to reside in the earth.

**NARRATOR 1**

She was then laid to rest on the third day  
on a land adjacent to the palace.  
Sands were thrown onto her grave.  
The dusk was here and tomorrow would tell a different story.  
Vashti was indeed no more.

# Enoima Edem Okon and Berren Thamper

## Act V Scene II

*VASHTI'S burial mound. She stands all painted white and in white clothing. She is now a statue erected of herself.*

### NARRATOR 1

No sculptor has been able to sculpt such a fine woman,  
laid untapped in the one whose path unspeakably  
lives a trail for emulation.  
Bold, fearless and unwearied, you paid the price for a prize.  
The King and his kingdom, the prize you chose worth your fight  
though it cost you all.

### NARRATOR 2

The King said you were beautiful,  
I guess he was blind.  
He couldn't see beyond the sensual,  
that which you possessed,  
which fares far beyond one's eyes.

### NARRATOR 1

We see virtue,  
we see patience,  
we see a woman,  
not wavered by the gnashing of fangs,  
but firm in her will.  
You indeed stayed faithful to fate,  
for such you ordained to hold the system still.  
You humbly chose to surrender,  
that no man's pride would have it all.

### NARRATOR 2

From this day onward,  
we know what is expected of us,  
and that we shall adhere to,  
for thus you've enlightened our path.  
[To the audience:] We thank you all for granting us  
your audience to end silence and hear our  
account of a great queen.

*Light fades.*





THE JOURNAL OF AFRICAN YOUTH LITERATURE

# ESSAYS





# Royston Pieterse

Royston Pieterse from Cape Town, South Africa, has been teaching English Language and Literature to high school students for seven years and is passionate about inspiring a love for learning within his students. He stands for equity, empathy, respect, and relationships, and believes that highlighting the worth of these principles is best explored through literature.

Royston holds a BCom (Law), a BA (International Relations and Diplomacy), a PGCE, and is currently studying towards a BA (Hons) in English Studies at Unisa. His essay presented here derives from his recent studies of the Fantasy genre in literature, including contemporary African Youth Fantasy by Nnedi Okorafor.

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## **A Melee with Morality: A discussion of how the main characters in *The Throne of the Crescent Moon* and *What Sunny Saw in the Flames* navigate the tension between good and evil**

The battle between good and evil has fascinated humankind and our myriad cultures since our species could first tell stories. There seems to be, in humanity, an innate sense of the dichotomy between that which is benevolent and that which is malevolent in our world. However, most stories depict the choice to do bad as the easy choice, the tempting choice, as it often comes with tangible rewards: material wealth, power, being feared. In contrast to this, making the right choice, the moral choice, comes at a great cost and sacrifice. This internal conflict has fed into our myths, cultures, and religions. Stemming from this, human cultures worldwide have established mores, moral codes, ways of living, behaving and being which are considered virtuous, allowing us to distinguish good from evil.

Moreover, this desire to be good has fed into the stories we tell. It is also what makes Fantasy literature so appealing because good (usually) triumphs over evil. Fantasy literature seems to ease the ostensibly universal anxieties experienced by many cultures in the world by modelling the behaviour believed to be crucial in solving problems, crucial in defeating evil. Ursula K. Le Guin (1975: 147) states that “fantasy is the natural, the appropriate, language for the recounting of the spiritual journey and the struggle of good and evil in the soul.” Here, Le Guin highlights the spiritual journey to which many cultures subscribe and how this journey is emulated in the tropes and concerns explored in Fantasy literature. In this vein, the main characters in *The Throne of the Crescent Moon* (2012) written by Saladin Ahmed and in *What Sunny Saw in the Flames* (2011) by Nnedi Okorafor (also published under the title *Akata Witch*), are required to navigate this tension between good and evil.

Dr Adoulla Makhslood from Ahmed’s novel is an old, experienced man and does not view the world through a dichotomous lens; rather, he views the world as a combination of good and bad, and believes that the true test of a person’s character is through their deeds and the motivations behind them. However, he does use religious scriptures as part of his spell casting as a ghul (ghoul) hunter and this is the framework for his belief system. The Traitorous Angel, ghuls, and djenn encountered in the novel are undoubtedly evil – there is no grey area there. He believes that human beings have the capacity for both good and evil and that it is God’s will that people try to use their good to defeat pure evil. His protégé, Raseed bas Raseed, however, while able to identify pure evil as Adoulla does, views adherence to rules and religion as a sign of piety and goodness. This makes his worldview more rigid. This could be problematic in a world in which morality is not always clearly defined.

On the other hand, in the second novel I discuss, Sunny Nwazue is a preteen who is still learning about the world around her. She is viewed as an outsider by many in her society and because of this, she shares a similar view of people to Adoulla, albeit less worldly. Even as she discovers her new hidden identity, she encounters evil and is clearly able to distinguish between it and the duality of human beings. Adoulla and Sunny seem to understand the fallibility of humans, while Raseed seems naively rigid about what is considered right and wrong in his society.

# Royston Pieterse

This tension between right and wrong is what could be considered morality, and it is an extremely important concept, particularly in Fantasy literature. Because the underlying nature of ethical dilemmas that characters navigate in Fantasy are as real as those encountered by protagonists in realist literature, the reader of Fantasy is encouraged to learn something and may be educated on ethics (Takle, 2017: 222). Quoting Martha Nussbaum, Takle (223) states: “Some stories clearly divide people into certain groups and pass on to children that ‘the world will be set right when some ugly and disgusting witch or monster is killed’”. Takle (ibid) believes that this is:

an unfortunate contribution to the impression one can often get from reading simplistic stories for children; the idea of that the world easily can be divided into rigid polarizations like good/evil, without the necessary precaution of nuancing this even slightly for the readers/listeners.

Ursula le Guin (1975: 144) says something similar:

Most great fantasies contain a very strong, striking moral dialectic, often expressed as a struggle between the Darkness and the Light. But that makes it sound simple, and the ethics of the unconscious of the dream, the fantasy, the fairytale are not simple at all. They are, indeed, very strange.

This is the gravity of morality, of free will. Authentic characters like Adoulla, Raseed, and Sunny grapple with their conscience in order to determine what is right and wrong. While Adoulla and Sunny seem to accept that “sometimes right is wrong and wrong is right” (Okorafor, 2011: 74), Raseed has not (yet) accepted his (dark) side, his shadow, as suggested by Carl Jung (1938), and this makes him vulnerable to exploitation, manipulation, and suffering. While Adoulla can be seen as morally ambiguous, and Sunny can be seen as monstrous, Raseed is an example of the moral rigidity of ‘purity’ and its limitations. In their individual ways, these characters navigate and grapple with their own inclinations towards good and evil.

*The Throne of the Crescent Moon* is set in the city of Dhamsawaat in a quasi-Middle Eastern kingdom where ghuls and djenn exist and are a threat to the tentative peace in human society. Adoulla Makhslood, “the last real ghul hunter in the great city of Dhamsawaat” (Ahmed, 2012: 4), loves the city and has lived there his entire life. He loves the character of the city for its good qualities. He accepts that individuals will always have a bit of both good and bad within them, and so offers his friendship to thieves, whores, scholars, and shop owners alike. This outlook allows him to see the human being before judging them for their occupation or position in life. He has empathy and is able to view things from others’ perspectives. He even has a long-standing relationship with Miri Almoussa, the madam of a well-known brothel in the city. Miri is the love of his life, but people judge him for being in love with a prostitute.

In particular, it is interesting to note his response to the Falcon Prince, Pharaad Az Hammaz, a Robin Hood-like figure who publicly opposes the iron-fisted Khalif, the ruler of the kingdom. While Adoulla is a ghul hunter and, by definition, fights evil, he understands the difference between morality on the one hand, and the binary of good versus evil on the other. As the primary protagonist, his perception of the Falcon Prince encourages the reader to contemplate whether this thief-prince should be deemed evil or not.





The reader is asked to consider Adoulla's response to the Falcon Prince and his reasoning, alongside his resounding abhorrence of ghuls. When speaking to his friend Yehyeh about the Falcon Prince, the narrator reveals that Adoulla:

agreed that the "Prince" was likely mad, but he still found himself approving of the would-be usurper. The man had stolen a great deal from the coffers of the Khalif and rich merchants, and much of that money found its way into the hands of Dhamsawaat's poorest [...]

Adoulla snorted: "'Khalif's justice'? Now there were two words that refuse to share a tent! That piece of shit isn't half as smart a ruler as his father was, but he's twice as cruel. Is it justice to let half the city starve while that greedy son of a whore sits on his brocaded cushions eating peeled grapes?" (Ahmed, 2012: 5).

In this passage, it is clear that while Adoulla accepts that theft is wrong, he understands the morality of thieving from those who benefit from the suffering of the poor, the "Khalif and rich merchants". Sometimes one has to fight fire with fire. Furthermore, Adoulla's snorting at Yehyeh's question about justice clearly indicates his criticism of the concept of justice as it pertains to right and wrong. He questions whether it should still be considered just for a ruler to enjoy extreme luxury in the form of "brocaded cushions" and "peeled grapes", while his subjects suffer starvation. He is also critical of the Khalif, referring to him as a "greedy son of a whore" (Ahmed, 2012: 7). For Adoulla, therefore, there is more justice in the Falcon Prince's actions, placing the stolen money "into the hands of Dhamsawaat's poorest". Again, his perspective elucidates the complex relationship between good, evil, and morality. Adoulla understands that life is not that straightforward, and, in this way, Ahmed shows that Fantasy literature can be instructive for readers and reflect the complexity of their real-world circumstances, despite its fantastical material.

In contrast to Adoulla's position, Raseed is critical of the Falcon Prince. Adoulla then admonishes Raseed saying:

"We are obligated to fight the servants of the Traitorous Angel. Pharaad Az Hammaz may be a criminal, but he feeds the poor and chastens the proud. Surely even your zealous eyes can see the virtue in that!" (Ahmed, 2012: 26).

Adoulla questions blind adherence to man-made rules and ideas of justice and criminality, and differentiates it clearly from evil. His reference to the Traitorous Angel refers to the "central plot conflict [which] is couched as a battle between the Merciful God of the books and the forces of the Traitorous Angel, which is, of course, a naked reference to the Abrahamic religions in the real world" (Binary Cafe, 2016). That humans are allowed to possess a blend of moral values is clearly Adoulla's perspective. Criminality does not necessarily equate to evil. However, what is good and what is evil is clearly defined, and it is his aim to get Raseed to understand the difference. Furthermore, it may be argued at this point that the Falcon Prince could be considered a hero, and probably is perceived as one by many of the poor of Dhamsawaat. At the same time, he might be viewed by others as evil in the sense that his behaviour is uncanny, unpredictable, and criminal even. However, his good deeds negate this potential evil; as in the Abrahamic religions mentioned above, there is an opportunity for redemption if one's deeds are morally just.

## Royston Pieterse

Moreover, in addition to this clear distinction between good and evil, Adoulla views the ghuls, Mouw Awa, Orshado, and the Traitorous Angel as purely evil, in opposition to the Merciful Angels and Merciful God. There is no grey area here for him. For example, bone ghuls are described in an early encounter with Adoulla and Raseed as monsters with “Maggots dribbling from one ghul’s neck-wound” while “The other stared at Raseed with empty eyes. Some vicious unliving instinct within the monster was weighing when to strike” (Ahmed, 2012: 38). These descriptions of undead beings covered in maggots, with their association with decomposing flesh, encourages in readers a feeling of disgust and abhorrence. These all conform to the concept of the “abject” described by Julia Kristeva (1982: 127) as what has been discarded from the body: waste particles. These descriptions connote the putrid, disgusting, and grotesque. This response to the ghuls also evokes Freud’s (1919, in Weinstock, 2020: 69) “uncanny”, in that we experience the uncanny “when there is intellectual uncertainty whether an object is alive or not, and when an inanimate object becomes too much like an animate one”. In the explanation of the uncanny, Freud further states that our fear of the undead is caused by our innate fear of death, but also our limited scientific knowledge about it (we need to be able to explain it, categorise it). We fear that “the dead man becomes the enemy of his survivor and seeks to carry him off to share his new life with him” (75).

The ghuls are stereotypical monsters “with empty eyes”, confirming their soulless nature. They are intent on doing harm as they possess a “vicious unliving instinct” to kill Adoulla and Raseed. Because of this, the reader thus shares Adoulla’s response to the ghuls: they are unequivocally evil.

The next monster in the novel, Mouw Awa, is described as a “jackal-thing” who “was apparently born of ancient Kem magics – twisted spells that [...] steel [...] and Adoulla’s invocations could well be useless against” (Ahmed 2012: 105). The “ancient Kem magics” are “twisted” (a word that cues the reader to read them as evil) and were used to create Mouw Awa. These are distinguished from the magic and spells invoked by Adoulla and his friends. While some might view Adoulla with trepidation due to his reputation for killing ghuls and casting spells, he is no monster. This distinguishes Mouw Awa from the novel’s protagonists. Mouw Awa cannot be defined according to existing knowledge of what is considered normal; he is also seen as a “disturbing hybrid” with an “incoherent bod[y]” and so is dangerous (Cohen, 1996: 6; Weinstock, 2020: 9). In particular, he must be differentiated from Zamia Banu Laith Badawi, a character who joins Adoulla and Raseed on their quest to defeat evil, because she, too, is a human-animal hybrid and is, therefore, potentially a monstrosity. However, her powers come from the Merciful Angel instead of “twisted magics” and her desire to combat and destroy evil categorises her as good, despite her monstrosity.

Finally, when Adoulla and his team encounter the main antagonist Orshado in battle in the novel, this purely evil being is described as:

tall but reed thin, and his flesh was jaundiced [...] his kaftan was the same cut and color as Adoulla’s, but soiled with waste and blood [...] Adoulla suddenly recalled his nightmare [...] before all of this horror had happened. The rivers of blood. His own kaftan stained with gore. It was said of the ghul of ghuls that his kaftan could never come clean. This, then, was the man that God had whispered of in the strange language of dreams. The foul man Adoulla was hunting [...] who had killed Miri’s niece and slaughtered the Banu Laith Badawi. Who had murdered Yehyeh and burned down Adoulla’s house and all of the precious memories it held (Ahmed, 2012: 207).





This description of Orshado depicts him as an abject monster, being “tall but reed thin” with “jaundiced flesh” and “soiled with waste and blood”. Readers are clearly meant to view him as an impure being, as the antithesis of all things holy. Kristeva’s (1982) theory of the abject is, again, applicable here. Orshado commands Mouw Awa to do his bidding and the former is known as the “ghul of ghuls”. Furthermore, he is the one about whom God warns Adoulla in “whisper[s] in the strange language of dreams” through showing him images of “rivers of blood” and “his kaftan stained with gore”. Orshado is depicted as a “foul man” who has “killed” and “slaughtered” and “murdered” and “burned down”. This confirms his status as malevolent and evil, and he is the one Adoulla, Raseed, and their friends are hunting. It is clear here that Adoulla views the ghuls, Mouw Awa, Orshado, and the source of their evil, the Traitorous Angel, in no uncertain terms: they are pure evil. This must be distinguished from the way in which he views the Falcon Prince, which is with some negative judgement, but certainly not as evil. The Prince breaks the law, but does not kill mercilessly. It is through these complex distinguishing features that Adoulla is able to navigate the tension between good and evil.

On the other hand, Sunny Nwazue from *What Sunny Saw in the Flames* is an adolescent girl who is still trying to find her place in the world. She describes herself as:

Nigerian by blood, American by birth, and Nigerian again because I live here [...] I have West African features [...] but while the rest of my family is dark brown, I’ve got light yellow hair, skin the colour of ‘sour milk’ (or so stupid people like to tell me), and hazel eyes that look like God ran out of the right colour. I’m albino (Okarafor, 2011: 4).

Sunny is a hybrid in several respects: she is half-American and half-Nigerian, she appears West African but has pale skin, and her albinism all but confirms her hybridity. Much like Mouw Awa and Zamia, Sunny could be viewed as a monster and for the same reasons. She also enjoys playing football and is good at it, even though she is “a girl” (Okarafor, 2011: 4). It is clear that her society, the “stupid people”, ensure that she is aware of her difference. Like Adoulla, Sunny is judged by her society. In fact, one of her peers at school, Jibaku, calls her “a pale-faced akata witch” (9). *Akata* means “bush animal” (14), and it is clear that people are somewhat fearful of her while simultaneously fascinated by her difference (see Cohen, 1996). Much like a monster, her otherness is pronounced and is based both on her background and, more importantly, her physical appearance. Therefore, Sunny almost instinctively understands that binaries and dichotomies are superfluous and that people are actually made up of a number of different and sometimes seemingly opposing elements.

Sunny later discovers that she has magical powers and is introduced to the “Leopard People”, who also have such powers, through her friends Orlu and Chichi (Okarafor, 2011: 31). Again, Sunny’s hybridity (read monstrosity) is made evident. The magic or juju that Leopard People can use and experience is invisible to non-magical people, known as “Lambs” (44). There is thus the potential for Leopard People to be viewed as monstrous by the Lambs and, doubly so, Sunny. This potential fear is even more pronounced when Sunny offers a glimpse of her “spirit face”, a magical masquerade-like countenance, to Jibaku, who had been bullying Sunny (120). Jibaku is frightened senseless. Sunny thus begins to realise that, while she possesses great power, she needs to control it, and there is an internal tension between good and potential evil within her. While Sunny clearly is not evil, there is the possibility of her using her power to exact revenge on her bully.

# Royston Pieterse

It is also worth noting that Sunny has a vision of the destruction of the world and her knowledge of the prophecy of “Raging fires, boiling oceans, toppled skyscrapers, ruptured land, dead and dying people” makes the Leopard People who know about her powers feel uneasy around her (3-4). Because Sunny is perceived as (possibly) monstrous by both the Leopard and Lamb (ordinary) society, her choices and actions are important, and the reader takes their cues from her as to whether to consider her good or evil.

In contrast to Sunny’s sometimes ambiguous moral position, a serial killer, Black Hat Otokoto, is on the loose in her home town and, like most people in her community, she perceives him as purely evil. There is no grey area here because he hunts children. Much like Mouw Awa and Orshado, Black Hat is purely evil. It becomes Sunny’s (and her friends’) duty, along with other members of the Leopard community, to find and destroy Black Hat because:

He wanted power. That remains his greatest hunger, and his hunger has opened him up to terrible powers of the earth. There is a forbidden juju, a black juju. It is old and secret [...] The juju is to bring the head of the centipede through – Ekwensu [...] The hunger for power will lead a person to dark, dead places. [...] He’s lost control of himself. He is lost. [...]. If he brings Ekwensu through, Ekwensu will build an empire. She did it once before, thousands of years ago (Okorafor, 2011: 191).

This excerpt speaks to morality and its impact on good and evil. Otokoto is portrayed as an individual whose desire for power is described as a “hunger”, which makes him vulnerable to “terrible powers”, and, again, the reader is encouraged to read these as evil. In this case, it is not so much that Otokoto was always pure evil but that a crisis of morality leads him to choose evil in order to satisfy his hunger for power. He is morally corrupt, and this leads him towards evil. These powers, which are further described as “forbidden”, “black”, “old and secret”, and will lead a morally poor individual to “dark, dead places”, connote occult, evil and ancient magic that should have remained hidden, akin to the ancient Kem magics which are used to conjure Mouw Awa and the ghuls in *The Throne of the Crescent Moon*.

Sigmund Freud’s theory of the uncanny is relevant here. In his essay on this concept, Freud (in Weinstock, 2020: 59) indicates that the uncanny is “undoubtedly related to what is frightening – to what arouses dread and horror”. He goes on to add that the uncanny reminds us of something old and long familiar and discusses the German word “unheimlich” to describe the idea of the uncanny (60). “Heimlich” means homely or familiar, and therefore it can be said that “unheimlich” is that which is unhomely, unnatural, unfamiliar. Freud then provides a number of interpretations of the word “unheimlich” as it relates to his idea of the uncanny, some of which include that which is “concealed, kept from sight [...] withheld from others”, that which is “eerie, weird, arousing gruesome fear”, and what “ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light” (60-64). Thus, a connection between the fear of the unknown, which is simultaneously familiar, is established in relation to the juju which Otokoto has discovered and plans to use to summon Ekwensu, an ancient malevolent figure similar to Orshado in *The Throne of the Crescent Moon*. Here, Otokoto is shown to be submitting to evil and will lose control of himself by doing so. The above description of Ekwensu and the evil power she possesses elicits an intense fear in Sunny, her compatriots, and, assumedly, in the reader. Nevertheless, Sunny uses her power to destroy Ekwensu in the final battle of the novel. While Sunny has juju of her own, and could thus be considered dangerous, she is still able to identify pure evil, distinguish it from good, and understand the morality of using one’s power for good instead of evil. And Sunny chooses to be good.





Finally, it cannot go without mention here, albeit briefly, that Raseed the dervish conforms to the idea of the individual who denies what Jung (1938: 131) describes as “the shadow” which we all possess. Raseed is described as pious, a zealot even, and seems to have a rigid idea of what is right and wrong. When speaking to Adoulla about Miri Almoussa, Raseed’s “birdlike mouth tightened in distaste”, and, quoting a holy text, he states, “O believer! If a man asks you to choose between virtue and your brother, choose virtue!” (Ahmed, 2012: 4, 10). When discussing the starving denizens of Dhamsawaat with Adoulla, Raseed comments, “For the starving man, prayer is better than food” (11). During his initial interactions with Zamia, the Badawi girl, Adoulla notes that “No doubt the dervish was twisting himself in knots trying to square the circle of his pious oaths with a young man’s natural reactions” (44).

Le Guin (1975: 141) eloquently describes Jung’s concept of the shadow when she expounds that:

Jung saw the ego, what we usually call the self, as only a part of the Self, the part of it which we are consciously aware of. The ego “revolves around the Self as the earth around the Sun.”

She further explains that if the ego is weak and afraid of its shadow, it tends to identify with or align, without much resistance, with cults, creeds, received beliefs, religions, and the “collective consciousness” (Le Guin, 1975: 141). What Le Guin means is that if the ego is not fully developed, it simply identifies with the collective consciousness of society, which refers to ideas to which the majority of society subscribes. It could be argued that Raseed’s ego is weak, which is why he so easily follows the rules of the dervish order and, indeed, the rules of his society, despite their potential for harm, and without ever questioning their validity critically. He piously promotes virtue and prayer above all else. This is why he responds to Miri Almoussa, a prostitute, with “distaste”. Furthermore, Jung’s theory suggests that the shadow is the other side of our psyche, the dark part of the conscious mind. Le Guin adds that one “who will not confront and accept [their] shadow is a lost soul” (141). Raseed refuses to accept or acknowledge his ‘shadow’ – he denies having an attraction to Zamia, rather suffering the internal conflict of a young man with physical desires because he views these feelings as sinful. Le Guin further explains that the shadow is not simply evil and that:

The person who denies [their] own profound relationship with evil denies [their] own reality [...]. For the shadow is the guide. The guide inward and out again [...] the guide of the journey to self-knowledge, to adulthood, to the light” (143-144).

Raseed clearly denies his own reality by refusing to accept his feelings for Zamia, which are perfectly normal. And, Le Guin suggests, in doing so, he denies himself the opportunity to arrive at self-knowledge, adulthood, and, ironically, the light to which he has always seemed to be striving.

Adoulla and Sunny, however, understand that no one is completely good or evil; they have embraced their shadow selves and thus come to know their true selves. Finally, though, it must be acknowledged that by the end of the novel, Raseed does recognise his need for self-examination. He says to Zamia:

“[...] it has made me think about... about many things. Almighty God forgive me, but after these past few days I no longer know just what my place in His plan is. [...] I think that I must take some time to find out. Alone” (Ahmed, 2012: 225).

# Royston Pieterse

It is left up to the reader to imagine whether Raseed will discover and acknowledge that life is not black and white, a binary of good versus evil. His journey, however, seems just about to begin.

In any discussion of how the main characters Adoulla and Raseed in *The Throne of the Crescent Moon* and Sunny in *What Sunny Saw in the Flames* navigate the tension between good and evil, it must be borne in mind that, by virtue of their profession (Adoulla and Raseed as ghul hunters) or their appearance (Sunny's albinism), these characters are viewed as different, as the 'other' by 'normal' society (Burney, 2012). The concept of the other is well defined as:

a term used to capture the ways other people are different from us. It's also used to describe the people who we keep distant from us because we decide they're not like us. The process of Othering occurs when we turn fellow humans into abstract entities we can distance ourselves from or treat as less-than-human (The Ethics Centre, 2020).

This other is often associated with what is different, and therefore bad, evil, wrong. Therefore, all three characters are, by default, required to traverse the challenges that come with being different. Furthermore, by virtue of his age, Adoulla has seen many things and has undergone many more life experiences than Raseed and Sunny. Therefore, his worldview is informed by a greater understanding and an acceptance of people's faults. While he is able to distinguish clearly between good and evil, he understands that there are grey areas in life.

In direct contrast to Adoulla, Sunny is very young and inexperienced but, because she is sometimes rejected due to what is viewed as hybridity, she is able to understand the fallacy of a binary of good and evil as it pertains to morality. She, too, understands the difference between good and evil, and recognises that her newfound power could tempt her into choosing to do the wrong thing, if she is not vigilant. She discovers that power can corrupt.

Finally, Raseed's rigid worldview prevents him from navigating the tension between good and evil effectively by the end of the narrative, as he is limited by his reluctance to accept and acknowledge his shadow self. While he easily identifies pure evil, he is unable to acknowledge the flaws that come with being human. Therefore, he leaves himself open to manipulation and control, unlike Adoulla and Sunny, who recognise and accept themselves (their flaws and their powers) fully, while keeping their potential for evil in check. As Le Guin (1975: 145) points out: "The hero or heroine is the one who sees what is appropriate to be done". This is because they have a clearer picture of the situation, one "which is greater than either evil or good" (ibid). In Le Guin's view, heroism equates with certainty and a trustworthy inner moral guide. This is, in effect, the heart of morality.





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ISSUE 05  
JAN 2022



THE JOURNAL OF AFRICAN YOUTH LITERATURE



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